

12 | Teaching in the Age of Social Distancing

50 | Halloween Arttober Prompts

80 | Apps that Get you Moving

96 | Cycling to Cape Soya

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- 08 Eikaiwa 101: An Introduction to Facilitating English Conversations by Andrea Cunningham
- 12 Teaching in the Age of Social Distancing by Rishma Hansil
- 16 Finding the Silver Lining: Covid, Student Loans and Savings by Derek Hurst
- 18 Making a House a Home: Real Estate Investment in Japan | Derek Hurst  
Interviewing Bruce McCulloug
- 24 Sticky Summers and Spotty Skin by Shannon Stocker
- 28 Being Sustainable. Period. by Monica Trautman
- 32 October Releases by Rachel Fagundes
- 34 For Love or Vengeance by Rebecca Paterson
- 40 Japanese Manhole Cover Designs: A Bureaucrat's Surprise Gift by Sabrina Hassanali
- 44 Physical Digging in a Digital Music Era by Nathan Post
- 48 Journey Through the Center of Light by Linka Wade
- 52 Halloween Artober Prompts by Julia Stasio
- 60 Life in the Unexplored by Caleb Dunaway
- 66 Weeknight Cooking, Meal Prep, the Tiny Fridge, and You | Multiple Contributors
- 74 Working Out from Home | Multiple Contributors
- 82 Apps that Get you Moving | Multiple Contributors
- 88 The Journey Not the Destination | Multiple Contributors
- 96 Cycling to Cape Soya by Regan McAllister
- 104 Cultural Exchange though Holiday Cheer by Nicholle Applewhite
- 108 Looking Back at Omikoshi 2019 by Eahab Masoud



# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

It's that time again! Another jam packed issue of CONNECT for you to sink your teeth into! For me, October is the month where Halloween lovers are in their **element**; some are even celebrating earlier than ever due to COVID in order to keep spirits up. I've even seen online some Christmas decorations happening, perhaps they've taken inspiration from the Philippines who begin to celebrate from *September*.

October also means we can walk outside without feeling like we've been slapped in the face by summer's perpetual humidity wall. Enjoy this "nice" temperature before November 1st where it's suddenly brutally cold and not leaving the comfort of your *kotatsu* sounds like a dream.

You may have noticed that last month CONNECT's front page got a little year-new facelift and I am *loving* it. It's crisp, clean, and showcases the photography featured monthly. Did you know that all photography featured in CONNECT is taken by the international community? They've got some major talent. This issue we also have a full team again (yusss!) plus a sparkly new business section run by Section Editor Derek Hurst. Can't wait to see what we can learn about business in Japan! Lara Yi will be joining us as the Language Section Editor. Lara will be including a monthly Japanese idiom so make sure to check them out so you can effortlessly use them with native Japanese speakers.

My picks from the October's issue include a cyclist's ambitious socially-distanced trip across Hokkaido which included some questionable choices but a lot of adventure in "Cycling to Cape Soya"; keeping on the the island theme, the extreme side, an ALT placed on an island of 80 people shares their experiences in "Life in the Unexplored"; over at the sports section folks share their favourite ways to workout indoors through a selection of YouTubers in "Staying Fit at Home"; A Japanese ghost story expert teaches us how to tell ghost stories the traditional way, only if you are brave enough to in "For Love or Vengeance: Three Haunting Tales to Start Your Hyaku Monogatari"; and a Tokyo alumna created her own Halloween Artober prompts for people to draw inspiration from and challenge themselves in "Halloween Artober Prompts".

Let's *enjoy* nearing sweater weather and perhaps the final few weeks of wasting time watching American TikToks.

Alice Ridley  
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Alice R.

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*"I don't know about everyone else but I think I'm kinda done. Can we just get to 2021?"*

— Avenue Beat, "F2020"

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*"You looked at me like I was someone else, oh well."* — Joji, "Slow Dancing in the Dark"

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*"A heart that always understands also gets tired"*  
— Unknown

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— The Emperor, "Mulan"

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*"For, even the very wise cannot see all ends."*  
— Gandalf the Grey, JRR Tolkien's "The Fellowship of the Ring"

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# Eikaiwa 101

## An Introduction to Facilitating English Conversations

Andrea Cunningham (Kyoto)

For foreigners interested in coming to Japan, teaching English is one of the “go-to” methods of getting here and having a steady paycheck. If you do take the teaching route, the two major schools are AET (Assistant English Teaching) and *eikaiwa*. If you’re familiar with the JET Program, you’ll know it primarily falls under the AET umbrella of English teaching. But what about *eikaiwa*? It’s very possible that even as a JET you could be asked to teach a class or two, or twenty! In this article let’s explore what *eikaiwa* is, how it differs from the job of an AET, and some tips for getting you off on the right foot for your first *eikaiwa* lesson.

To give some background, I am a fifth-year AET in Southern Kyoto. I have worked extensively at kindergarten, elementary school, and junior high school, and I have experience teaching both kids and adult *eikaiwa* as part of my contract on JET. I have never taught at an English conversation school so this article will instead be focusing on *eikaiwa* as it pertains to the JET Program. With that disclaimer out of the way, let’s first look at what *eikaiwa* is.

Eikaiwa 英会話 means “English conversation” and as the name implies, usually focuses more on speaking than on reading or writing. There are *eikaiwa* for both casual and business English learners. *Eikaiwa* is often used by non-native speakers as an opportunity to practice the English they’ve learned elsewhere with native speakers. In my experience classes can run anywhere from 45-90 minutes, and the content tends to be tailored to the individual or class. For example, in one class you may have a strong emphasis on giving speeches and in another, you may spend most of the time chatting and simply conversing in English. Overall, *eikaiwa* are flexible with both time and content and have an emphasis on speaking. Now that we know a little bit more about what *eikaiwa* is, let’s see what makes it different from AET work.

There are lots of unique aspects of *eikaiwa* that make them a world away from AET work, but let’s spotlight three major ones that you might not encounter in your every-day-AET life.

### 1. Being the Main Teacher

First and foremost, the biggest difference, in my opinion, between AET and *eikaiwa* work is the format. Most AETs work in a school as an assistant teacher to either the homeroom teacher or the Japanese English Teacher (JTE). For *eikaiwa*, you can throw this expectation out the window. There is usually only one teacher per class, with rare exceptions. Class size may be anywhere from 1 to 20 students but in my experience, 7-13 is a safe average. Smaller groups mean more one-on-one time with the teacher, allowing for a more personal experience and specialized assistance. Suddenly being the only teacher in the room can be shocking for those whose influence in the classroom ends at “Repeat after me!”.

### 2. Creating the Curriculum

There is (usually) no set curriculum with *eikaiwa*. The students join with goals in mind and you as the teacher help them to hit those milestones. For my adult *eikaiwa* students, I take a survey at the beginning of each term to get an idea of the class’s general goals and create the “curriculum” from there. This has been true for all of the adult *eikaiwa* classes I’ve taught. On the other hand, for my kids’ *eikaiwa* classes, I follow a textbook “curriculum,” which means I am required to teach them certain grammar points, while I have the freedom to decide how I teach them. The reason for this dichotomy is that the goal of *eikaiwa* for most school-age students is to pass a test or exam, whereas adults tend to have work-related goals or are just taking the class for leisure. Creating a curriculum from scratch may seem like a big ask but just remember that you’re always working towards your students’ goals.

### 3. Leading Student-Based Classes

The third difference is that *eikaiwa* is student-based as opposed to instructor-based. That can be an unusual concept to grasp since schools usually follow a curriculum where everyone learns the same material regardless of interest or relevance. “Student-based” means that the students’ goals and desires shape the class, not the other way around. Even with a textbook, you may spend way more time on one section than you anticipated based on the students’ response. If your students decide they don’t want to learn present progressive tense then you can scratch that off and move on to something that they do enjoy. To put it very simply, there is a lot more freedom in *eikaiwa* compared to AET work. Keeping these in mind, let’s explore some tips for *eikaiwa*, featuring anecdotes where I learned about the three differences we just talked about the hard way.



**Let's set the scene: you've suddenly been asked by your BoE or Contracting Organization to go to the local community center every Wednesday afternoon for six weeks to teach eikaiwa. You've never taught by yourself nor made a curriculum before, but you say yes because of that obscure clause in your contract that makes eikaiwa technically part of your contract. So what do you do? Here are three tips that'll guarantee that your first eikaiwa lesson doesn't go like mine did.**

### **1. Remember that eikaiwa is student-led**

The first time I taught eikaiwa, I wanted to teach my students what I thought they should know. By the time they were sorted into their English level-appropriate classes Harry Potter style, I had already made the entire curriculum. I had the graciousness to leave spots for games and activities where I could plug-and-chug their interests, but the bulk of the lessons were completed before I'd even met the students. I thought the classes went great. Then I read the feedback sheets they'd filled out at the end of the term. This leads to my second bit of advice:

### **2. Ask for feedback loudly and often (at least until you know your students)**

Asking for feedback is incredibly important when teaching eikaiwa because of how different it is from working as an AET. It can't be ignored that students attending eikaiwa are usually paying for it, as opposed to students who attend compulsory school. Dissatisfied students won't come back and/or they'll save their dissatisfaction until the teacher evaluations. One of my students was very displeased with my early lessons and dropped out of the class halfway through. I didn't find out why until I read the feedback sheets. Had I asked for opinions and feedback early on, I might have been able to turn things around. Your students may be uncomfortable coming forward so going to them and politely asking for feedback and in general keeping an ear to the ground to see how things are going can go a very long way.

**Finally and perhaps most important of all:**

### **3. Expect Imperfection**

Expect it from yourself and from your students. You'll have plenty of bomb lessons and you'll have plenty of lessons that will bomb. Some days your students just won't be interested. Some days you'll wish you could move that one lower level student out so you can progress smoothly or get rid of the know-it-all who really should be in Advanced instead of Intermediate I. That's okay. Language-learning is a marathon, not a sprint. Learn with your students and enjoy the ride.

**Hopefully this article was able to demystify the amoeba that is eikaiwa as well as instill confidence in you that it isn't some insurmountable task. With patience and trust in yourself and your students, eikaiwa can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your English-teaching life.**

*Andrea Cunningham is a 5th year AET in Kyoto Prefecture. She lives with her husband and their dog, Gatsby. Her hobbies are Animal Crossing, cycling, and performing with her local taiko group.*



Photo by note  
thanun on Unsplash



# TEACHING IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

Rishma Hansil (Tokyo)

For many ALT teachers across Japan, there have been massive changes to our language learning lessons post COVID-19 lockdown. Students have returned to schools with a strict list of measures in place to reduce the spread of infection. In many schools, activities such as group work, speaking activities and interactive games are strictly prohibited. On the other hand, many other teachers are still teaching remotely. Our role as ALTs has always been to adapt to the needs of our classes, and this situation is no different. I'd like to share four tips from my social-distancing classrooms:



## 1. EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY

Amidst the lockdown, teachers had no choice but to take their show on the “digital” road. Classes were taught through an array of digital platforms, using anything that could help students and teachers connect in a meaningful way. For classes with over 30 students, teachers used Zoom and Google Classroom to conduct lessons by separating the classes into teams and sending them to “breakout rooms” in Zoom in order to better facilitate essay writing and discussion. For students who couldn't make the live sessions, videos were uploaded to YouTube

via a private link. Having a digital database of resources helped students study on their own time and gave teachers some fluidity in preparing lesson materials. In these situations, the ALTs' primary roles included assisting the JTE with video recording, modeling grammar and starring in interactive skits.

Club activities, like our school's Language Club, relied on LINE to communicate with each other, share resources and even send voice notes for pronunciation practice. ALT teachers would also make themselves available for one hour a day on a zoom call, during which students could join the meeting for free conversation practice and get help with any assignments they were working on. Meetings were scheduled by grade to ensure the same level of students were participating in the conversation.



## 2. LISTENING INSTEAD OF SPEAKING

In the first month back at school, speaking in the classroom was prohibited. This was challenging as ALTs predominantly did speaking and conversation practice with students. To work around this, we decided to replace our speaking practice with more focused listening practice in our lessons. For a bit of fun, we watched YouTube videos, which were used as listening comprehension practice and gap-fills for the higher level students. Some videos included Aesop's Fables, scenes from popular movies and snippets from National Geographic documentaries.

Another listening practice we used in our lessons was shadowing. The ALT would read a few sentences and students would map out the pauses, highlight the intonation of words and underline the points of emphasis in each sentence. This technique made the students hyper aware of the ALTs speech, and over the course of three weeks students were able to listen to more complex pieces of dialogue. This activity was repeated again when speaking was allowed in the classroom and students were able to reproduce the patterns of speech modeled by the ALT.



## 3. GOING THE (SOCIAL) DISTANCE

How can we replace the high fives and good morning greetings with students in the hallways? Perhaps an elbow touch? ALTs needed to find new ways to connect with our students despite the distance. At our school, we used a simple hand wave and threw in some fun expressions like “stay safe” and “wash your hands”. With the Language Club cancelled, we decided to meet once a week at lunch time for an event called “English Table”. The classrooms were set up with enough space between students, and we invested in games that could be played from a safe distance while still using English. Games like Apples to Apples, Scattergories Categories, Scrabble and Pictionary were some student favorites. All of these games were bought online from Amazon Japan and delivered directly to the school.

Additionally before COVID-19, ALTs would usually meet students for one-on-one essay reviews after school in the staff room. With social-distancing restrictions in mind, we decided to build a safe “language bubble” in the hallway, consisting of two desks and chairs divided by a large sheet of clear, sturdy, plastic. We could safely review essays, provide feedback and chat with our students from the comfort of our bubble.



## 4. INTERACTIVE LEARNING AND PAIR WORK

Peer-to-peer learning has always been a successful model in the language learning classroom. To encourage socially distancing friendly peer-to-peer learning, we retooled our usual classroom set up to ensure a safe atmosphere for the students. With desks spaced out, students were positioned back-to-back and did information gap activities. For example, 2-4 students would be listening for the missing words with their back against one student doing the reading. In other scenarios, an aisle was made down the middle of the classroom or diagonally and one student would speak one at a time from across the class to their partner or the ALT positioned on the other end of the classroom.



As ALTs we were also encouraged to make our own lesson plans and activities while using the textbook as a guide to review the grammar points and target language students were currently learning. One successful activity was based on Unit 4 Book 1 of the New Horizon Textbook. Students had to review the grammar point “I want” and the counters, like “one cup” and “one pack of”. We created a mock fast food menu board for our restaurant “BurgerMcChicken” with its own unique items and prices, while the ALT played the role of the cashier and the students were the customers. Students were spaced out as per social distancing guidelines and would come up one by one to the imaginary counter and place their order in English. This activity requires some prep work, but it was certainly worth it as it got the students moving around the classroom safely.

It's been challenging navigating this new style of social-distancing friendly learning. Our role as ALTs in the classroom may have changed, but we will continue to find new ways to engage, interact and inspire our young learners, all the while wearing warm smiles behind our masks. There's no telling how long these measures will have to be observed, but as time goes on we will continue to adjust and find new creative solutions.



*Rishma has been living and working in Tokyo since 2017 as an Assistant Language Teacher and Tokyo Prefectural Advisor to the JET community. She holds an M.A in Future Media from Birmingham City University. She is the author of “[Animal Adventure](#)” an activity book for children set in her home country, the sunny Caribbean island of Trinidad & Tobago.*



# IDIOM OF THE MONTH

虻蜂取らず (あぶはちとらず)

**ABUHACHITORAZU**

Lara Yi (Incoming JET)

The meaning of *abuhachitorazu* is to attempt two tasks simultaneously while accomplishing neither, and can be translated into: catching neither the horsefly or the bee.

## IDIOM BREAKDOWN (1,2)

虻 / あぶ / abu / horsefly, *noun*

蜂 / はち / hachi / bee, wasp or hornet, *noun*

取 / と / to / to take, *verb*

-ず / -zu / without, *auxiliary verb*

## EXAMPLE SENTENCE

そんなに欲をかいていると、虻蜂取らずになっちゃうよ。

Son'nani yoku o kaite iru to, abuhachitorazu ni natchau yo.

Don't be so greedy, or you'll wind up with nothing.

## SOURCES

1. <https://bit.ly/2ZzapbL>
2. <https://bit.ly/3meqxcpx>



# FINDING THE SILVER LINING: COVID, STUDENT LOANS AND SAVINGS

DEREK HURST (NAGANO)



Photo by Tim Gouw on Unsplash

How has COVID affected student loan repayment? This is a big one for a lot of people (non-Americans included), and fortunately there's a lot of reason to see that as terrible as this pandemic has been, there is a clear silver lining also, especially for recent grads. In fact, it turns out most of us will actually find ourselves in a much better place now than we would have been had Corona not hit, at least in terms of repaying our loans. As Americans are usually the most impacted by student loans, this article will be written from a US perspective.

The biggest reason to feel a sweet, tinge of hope today is that interest rates in the United States have been dropped to 0% for the foreseeable future (1). Although slightly terrifying from a macroeconomic perspective, this rate reduction ensures that graduates will not find themselves compounding what for most is an already outrageous loan with increasing interest. The same presidential memorandum established that student loan repayments would be immediately suspended for 60 days, and subsequent CARES act (passed in March 2020) also had provisions for extending the loan suspensions even further

(currently expiring September 30th). Forthcoming supplemental legislation and stimulus packages are being discussed in congress as we speak, and although it is not certain when (or even if) these packages will be enacted, it is a safe bet to assume that there will be some provision for extending and possibly enhancing the current loan-repayment measures.

However, getting back to the issue of interest rates, many analysts believe that the 0% rates will likely continue through at least the end of the fiscal year, if not further. I hesitate to make my own predictions, but I think we can reasonably expect to see this 0% rate stay in place until at least August 2021, which will mean hundreds, and in some cases, thousands saved for graduates. There's no telling when things will get back to 'normal', but for now, I think we can allow ourselves a well-earned breather.

As to how COVID has impacted the rest of your finances, well, it depends on what your current situation is. If you don't have any savings (by the way, this was me in my first three years in Japan. Protip—don't be me), then there's very

little that's changed. Those who have savings either in Japan or back home would do well to transfer your money immediately into some kind of low-volatility ETF or IRA, because right now most savings accounts/bonds are currently earning you negligible returns on account of the aforementioned 0% interest rate. I'm sure many of you have heard of the app Robinhood, and regardless of its perceived shortcomings, it's free, has free trades and can be opened as long as you have a SSN and an American bank account. Take my advice: open an account, deposit a few hundred into it and immediately buy into SPY (the ETF which follows the S&P500). You can then rest easy knowing that market volatility notwithstanding, you won't be losing any money over the mid to long term. My future articles will detail some ways you can leverage your money to beat inflation using conservative and time-proven investment strategies, but for right now, just know that if you let your yen and dollars collect dust in a savings account, it's going to be slowly eaten by inflation.

The takeaway from all of this is to realize that while COVID has been undeniably terrible for

many, many reasons, if you're willing to risk a brief look on the bright side, you'll find that there is light at the end of the tunnel. And, if you're really smart about it, you may just be able to use this pandemic as a basis for getting yourself on the right financial track. So, use this time wisely, educate yourself and maybe take a few minutes to realize that there's always a silver lining to every black cloud.

1. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/memorandum-continued-student-loan-payment-relief-covid-19-pandemic/>

*My name is Derek Hurst, and I am the new business section editor for **CONNECT** Magazine. I came as and ALT on JET from 2008-2011 where I taught in northern Nagano Prefecture, and subsequently spent the next 10-odd years in Japan, mostly continuing my work in education as both a public school ALT and eikaiwa teacher. I also spent two years officiating weddings My academic background is in Foreign Languages and Economics.*



# Making a House a Home:

## Real Estate Investment in Japan

Derek Hurst (Nagano) interviewing Bruce McCullough (Tokyo)

Anyone who's spent time in Shibuya-ku may have seen a red Volkswagen Bus from time to time, driving around or parked in high-traffic areas of the trendy ward. The bus belongs to Bruce McCullough, and serves as the boots-on-the-ground face of his new fashion venture, Shibuya Republic. Bruce, however, has a much bigger portfolio than just a VW. When he arrived from Canada some twenty years ago, he never imagined he'd end up where he is today: managing almost two dozen properties in both Tokyo and his hometown of Vancouver, running his own fashion brand, and all-around enjoying life with his two children and wife in their beautiful home in Shibuya. After graduating from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver with a degree in economics, Bruce spent the first part of his twenties as an entrepreneur, first selling cars and then starting his own nightclub/restaurant, Ankor, with friends. The nightclub eventually went bankrupt, but Bruce remained undeterred, and if anything, was enlivened by the failure of his first foray into hospitality. Bruce came to Japan soon after and began teaching at a private high school, where he would remain for the next fifteen years, all the while gradually amassing his own portfolio of condominiums and apartments in the Tokyo metropolitan area. By the time he finally left teaching, he had gained not just a monthly cashflow from his properties that dwarfed his teaching salary, but also permanent residency status in Japan.





### **How exactly did you get in the real estate business?**

There's nothing super unique about it. Back when I was in Vancouver, I was running Ankor [the Nightclub] with my buddies, and we were making money, sure, but the thing was, the rent was so damn high for the place. We finally had to close it because of that, but it made me realize that if you don't own your own property, you're wasting your mental energy and time. I came to Japan on a working holiday visa and about fifteen grand Canadian and started teaching at the high school. The good thing was, over the fifteen years I ended up working at that school, I was buying up properties in the area, and by the time I got downsized, I was making way more through my rentals than at the school. The school knew that, and pretty much told me, "Hey, since you're doing well enough without us, would you mind if we didn't renew your contract?"

### **What has been the biggest joy of your work?**

I got to say it's just the freedom it allows me. But I also am getting to learn a ton of new skills I never had before, I mean when you're managing so many places you have the right skills, carpentry, plumbing, etc. I've really become a tradesman in the second half of my life, and it's been great. But I also love making old places look fresh and new, you know, breathing a second life into them. I just get excited about real estate, from finding the places to polishing them up and finally to renting them out. It's all a joy, but, for sure, the freedom of not having a boss or being tied to a single company is great. I love working for myself.

### **How about the biggest challenge? What's that been?**

There's always things, you know? I believe in Murphy's Law, you gotta plan for the worst but expect the best. Something always can always go wrong, but if you've done your work you'll always come out alright. Coronavirus has definitely been tough, more so for Shibuya Republic [the fashion brand]—I mean the economy's been just so wrecked by the virus. Fortunately I've only lost one renter, and was able to replace them soon enough after a couple of weeks. But, you see, that's the good thing about working for myself and owning my own properties: if something goes south I know I'll always be able to land on my feet. If you're tied to a single workplace with a single income source, you're taking a huge risk. At least, you're able to own your own places, you've got more of a safety net. I know not everyone's got that luxury, but that's the reason you've got to start building some equity before it's too late.

### **Are there any resources you'd recommend for people wanting to get into the real estate business?**

Like I said, you just got to start somewhere; size doesn't matter. I didn't exactly grow up with money, and it was only by working hard and keeping my eyes forward that I got to where I am today. I'm just a regular guy at the end of the day. I started by saving up enough just to buy my first place, and then I moved out, rented it out, and went to the next one. After fifteen years of doing that it created a base to let me leave teaching. It's really that simple. Of course, having permanent residency

definitely makes things easier, especially on the financing side. Banks are much more willing to give mortgages and what-not when you've got PR, so that would be the first thing I'd tell other foreigners wanting to get into the real estate business. 'Course, if you got enough capital, it doesn't really matter if you got PR or not, but if you were like me, and didn't have a ton of free cash to throw into a couple of condos, you have to get a bank to give you the money.

### **Any other tips you'd tell someone?**

You really don't have to go post-grad these days, and overall I'd say you have to really ask yourself if college is right for you. Coming to Japan, yeah, you're going to need a four-year degree, but beyond that, I really don't think it's worth it. Compared to when I went to school in the 90s, information is a lot more accessible these days—a lot less centralized. Back then, the only place you could get information was the university library, that was the whole reason you went to college; you couldn't get that info anywhere else. Today you got YouTube, Google and Kahn Academy. It's all out there for free. But, in terms of real estate tips, like I said before, you got to learn how to do basic carpentry, plumbing and painting. You have to know what to look for in a property and be able to spot any red flags. Knowing what areas have growth potential is important in Japan, since a lot of places the real estate market's kind of dead here. But there's always opportunities if you look hard enough and are willing to put in the hard work. More generally, I'd say it's really important to build multiple income streams, not just for real estate but for life in general. It's all about mitigating risk. If the economy tanked tomorrow

and all my renters moved out, yeah it'd be bad, but I've got enough other sources of income now that we'd (my family and I) be alright. That's the freedom I was talking about before, if you got one job and one income source, you're really putting yourself in a dangerous position. All it takes is one talk with your boss and you're out.

### **What does the future look like for you?**

I'm trying to grow Shibuya Republic at the moment, and we're doing well there, despite COVID. But I'd really like to buy more properties in the American midwest at this point, especially in Milwaukee, for instance. There's so many places in the midwest that are great buys right now in high-growth neighborhoods. I'd like to be able to split my time more evenly between Canada and Tokyo, especially now that my kids are getting older. They're still in school, but I'd really like it for them to have the exposure to Canadian and American life. Hopefully, things in the world can return to normal soon enough, and I'll be able to travel more freely. But again, you never know. Like I said: Murphy's Law.

*Bruce McCullough is a Canadian real estate developer and entrepreneur who lives in Shibuya, Tokyo with his wife and two children. His website is <https://shibuyarepublic.org>. You can also find him on Instagram [@shibuyarepublik](https://www.instagram.com/shibuyarepublik).*





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*"Glendower: I can call spirits from the vasty deep."*

*Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any man;*

*But will they come when you do call for them?"*

— William Shakespeare (Henry IV, Part 1, 3.1)

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*"There is no better designer than nature"*

— Alexander McQueen

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*"And all at once, summer collapsed into fall."*

— Oscar Wilde



# Sticky Summers and Spotty Skin

AVOID THE PERILS OF HUMIDITY AND MASK-WEARING  
WITH OUR ROUND-UP OF SKINCARE ESSENTIALS

**Shannon Stocker**  
Incoming JET

As we adjust to wearing masks more often in the inevitable stickiness that comes with the end of summer, our skin is confronting a losing battle to stay spot-free and glowing. If you're like me, and love to keep your skin fresh and clean, you might be feeling helpless as to how

to treat your skin right about now. It's a sweaty time of year, and wearing a mask is only making us even hotter (not in a good way, sadly). With my lack of experience in humid climates, I turned to my friends for some skincare advice. Here's what they suggested. . .

## WATER

Let's start with the obvious. Drink water—at least three litres a day, to be exact. Trust me, your skin will thank you. Drinking water has a variety of benefits attributed to it, from improving skin tone and preventing premature aging to reducing puffiness and preventing acne. I have long been awful at remembering to drink water, but my friends and family are constantly reminding me of how beneficial it will be for my skin. Over the past few months I have stuck to their advice, and the difference has been noticeable! So, fill up your water bottle or pick up a bottle of *I Lohas* at the *conbini* throughout the day. Set a notification on your phone or download *Plant Nanny* from the Apple App Store to track your intake.

## FACE WASH

A good face wash is a must-have, regardless of the weather. Having never picked up a face wash in Japan, I turned to my friend Catherine, who lived in Japan for two years, for some advice. She suggested *Dove Foaming Face Wash*, and it seems to be the perfect option for the summer. Its frothy formula is perfect for removing sweat and stickiness from your skin, with added hydration for that summer dewiness. This *Dove* face wash even has some variants for acne sufferers and those with sensitive skin. Other great options that have been suggested to me are *Bifesta Moist Foaming Whip* and *Ettusais Foamy Rich Mousse*; both great for cleaning sweat-drenched skin and hydrating irritated mask chaffing.







Photos: Marie Veronique (CC), pikisuperstar, Aaron Burden (Unsplash.com)

## OIL-FREE SPF

Don't add more oil that you need to when you're already sweating under the summer sun. This one was a new lesson for me. Being from the UK, SPF isn't really a necessity any time of the year (we only tend to get two weeks of sunshine per year, if we're lucky!) so I wasn't even sure what my options were. After a few chats with friends on the subject, I've got three options on my wishlist:

*Bioré UV Aqua Rich Watery Essence Sunscreen SPF50+*

Apparently, this sunscreen is the one on everybody's lips. This is a cult favourite formula that is lightweight, smells amazing and contains hyaluronic acid (which will speed up the healing of any blemishes or mask chaffing).

*Waterproof Baby Milk by Pigeon*

I read about this one online, though marketing toward babies and toddlers, this formula is a perfect option for humid, mask-wearing days with its ability to withstand water and sweat. It's delicate enough to be worn under your mask without contributing to clogged pores.

*Urban Environment Oil-Free UV Protector SPF42 Sunscreen*

Though a slightly more expensive option, this is great for those of you who like to invest in their skincare regime. This is a water resistant formula that protects against pollutants.



## COOLING MIST

Mists are life saving product for when your mask starts feeling like a small sauna attached to your face. I am a long-time buyer of *LUSH* toners. Get one that comes in a spray bottle, like *Tea Tree Water* or *Breath of Fresh Air*, pop it in the fridge and spritz over your face throughout the day. Other recommendations include cooling sheets by *Gatsby* or *Uno*. They work to remove oil and cool you down by a few degrees—I can't wait to try them!

Photo: Aaron Burde



## PEELING MILK

This one is something I discovered on my first ever trip to Japan, when I was hoarding skincare products from every cosmetic store I saw. *Ettusais Peeling Milk* is a miraculous product for those of us with dry skin, but it is also great for any skin type that has been exposed to pore-clogging pollutants or the consistent rubbing of a mask. It is a mildly acidic formula that gently rubs away dull, textured cells from the surface of your skin. All you need to do is apply a small amount onto a clean, dry face and rub in circular motions until you feel tiny clumps all over your face (that's your dead skin!). I find it's much calmer on my face than an exfoliator and it does a far better job at removing dead skin cells to give me a real, juicy glow. Everyone I've recommended this product to has become a peeling milk convert. It comes in fragrance free and alcohol-free variants, for those of you who have special skincare requirements. Use it once or twice a week for a refreshed, poreless look!

If you've been looking for some tips to surviving the humidity while wearing a mask, try these out and let me know what you think at [connect.fashion@ajet.net](mailto:connect.fashion@ajet.net).

*This article was put together by Shannon, our Fashion and Beauty Editor, with a little help from her friends. Thank you to those who contributed their suggestions. Shannon has just graduated from Central Saint Martins in London, UK and currently lives in Liverpool. She will be moving to Japan to work as an Assistant Language Teacher soon.*



# Being Sustainable. Period.



Talking about periods can be uncomfortable. I would know, I used to teach 10 and 11-year-olds sex education! A few years ago, a student in my co-workers' class was less than impressed when she learned that menstrual flow can last 5-7 days. This seemed like a huge inconvenience to her. So, after thinking it over, she announced, "When I get my period, I'm just going to pee it all out!" Sadly, that's not an option, so let's talk through what we can do!

I started out, as most of us who menstruate do, using liners and tampons. These are super convenient but terrible for the environment. In fact, the average pack of pads contains the equivalent of four plastic bags. There are some companies that produce liners and tampons from organic cotton, which is a better option but still creates a lot of waste. Plus, cotton is very resource-intensive to grow as it requires a lot of water. The three most environmentally friendly options are the cup, period underwear, and reusable pads. All three are better for the environment, assuming you stick with them and continue to reuse them. However, they still come with their advantages and disadvantages. . . .

**Monica Trautman**  
(Fukushima)

**... the average pack of pads contains the equivalent of four plastic bags**

## The Cup

Menstrual cups are made of medical-grade silicone. They're the best option, environmentally speaking, because one cup can be used throughout an entire menstrual cycle. It just needs to be rinsed out and reinserted regularly. At the end of the cycle, it should be disinfected by cleaning with soap and boiling in water. One of the downsides to the cup is comfort. Some people find it difficult to insert or take out, but most people find that it gets much easier and comfortable after being used a few times. Many people also find this option less convenient if they need to reinsert in a public washroom. Not everyone feels bold enough to rinse out their cup in a public sink! Even so, this option is by far the most cost-effective. One cup costs around 4000 yen and will last for years when well cared for.

## Reusable Pads

Reusable pads work similarly to disposable pads but, rather than being sticky, most reusable pads are secured with a snap. In online reviews, many people say that they find reusable pads to be much more comfortable than disposable ones. This is because they lack the plastic feel of their disposable counterparts, instead using cotton, which moulds to your body more easily. Cloth pads are less expensive than period underwear, yet less economical because of the



need for multiple pads per cycle. Prices typically range between 1500 yen for a liner to 2400 yen for the most absorbent pads. Reusable pads are a good option for those who experience a heavier flow as many can hold the equivalent of four tampons. With that being said, there's no real downside to reusable pads compared to disposables, except the fact that you will have to wash them. Reusable pads can be pre-rinsed than washed in the washing machine and many brands can even be thrown in the dryer making them pretty hassle-free!

## Period Underwear

There are many brands of period underwear available. As period underwear is becoming more popular, brands are offering a wider selection of sizes, styles, and colors. Some period underwear is only meant to be worn as a back-up to give the wearer leak protection, but there are also styles that can hold the same amount as four tampons can. An advantage of period underwear is that it can be worn for most of the day, meaning no awkward rinsing out like with the cup—and they're less bulky than reusable pads. Period underwear should be pre-rinsed then washed in the laundry on a gentle cycle and hung to dry. This is a little bit more work than most disposable products, but I would like to think most people are laundering

After experiencing the convenience of period underwear, I wouldn't go back to disposable products. Now, I never have to worry about an emergency trip to the drugstore because I have run out of supplies. I also feel a lot better knowing that I am not sending products to the landfill every month.



their underwear after each wear anyway! The downside to period underwear is the cost. One pair can range between 4000 to 6000 yen and unless you want to do a lot of laundry, I'm guessing you will need more than one pair.

## My Opinion

Personally, I have tried both the cup and period underwear. The cup takes some getting used to in terms of insertion, but I was surprised that once it was in, I hardly knew it was there. As a back-up I always wear a pair of period underwear with my cup, but so far, I have never had a leak. On days when my flow is lighter, I wear only my period underwear. I find my period underwear to be a lot more comfortable than wearing a pad. I also like that I don't have to worry about leaving them on for too long, compared to the risk of getting Toxic Shock Syndrome if a tampon is inserted for too long! Even when I am being active, such as riding my bike or hanging upside down at the bouldering gym, I feel covered by my period underwear and I haven't had any leaks.

After experiencing the convenience of period underwear, I wouldn't go back to disposable products. Now, I never have to worry about an emergency trip to the drugstore because I have run out of supplies. I also feel a lot better knowing that I am not sending products to the landfill every month.

## Making the Switch

Making the switch to reusable products is an investment. But if you can find a product that you are willing to use over and over it will save you money in the long run. If you're buying a cup, I recommend reviewing multiple brands and styles to decide which one will be the best fit for you. There are also many different brands of period underwear and reusable pads that cater to all shapes, sizes and needs. So, if you choose to purchase period underwear I would recommend doing some research. There are a lot of brands out there and not all of them are made equally. One of the biggest things to look for is how long the absorbent part of the gusset extends. Some brands only have a protective lining where the typical gusset of your underwear would be. This is helpful if you are using the underwear for leak protection during the day, but pointless if you want to sleep in them.

The next thing to look for is fit. I would recommend only ordering one pair at a time of each style so you can decide if you like the fit before you really commit. When I made the switch to period underwear I tried three different styles. One stood out as being way more comfortable than the others so I bought it in every color. As far as how many pairs you will need, I recommend having two pairs for during the day and a third pair for at night. After that, it all depends on how often you want to do laundry!

If this article sparked any questions for you, or you want to try to convince me that reusable pads are actually the best option, don't hesitate to send me a message on Instagram. After years of teaching about puberty with the infamous question box, no question or comment can surprise me anymore.

*Monica grew up on a farm near Rimbey, Alberta, Canada. Before coming to Japan, she taught Grade 5 in an elementary school. Currently, she is working as an AET at four elementary schools in Fukushima. You can usually find Monica at her local bouldering gym, or out on her road bike.*

Instagram [@sakura.and.sunshine](https://www.instagram.com/sakura.and.sunshine)



Photos: Monica Trautman



# OCTOBER RELEASES

Rachel Fagundes (Okayama)

## MOVIES

### October 2

- Trolls World Tour (2020)
- On the Rocks (2020)
- The Farewell (2019)
- Never Look Away (2018)
- Ema (2019)
- The Captain (2019)
- House of Cardin (2019)
- Vic the Viking and the Magic Sword (2019)
- Burn the Witch (2020)

### October 6

- Caretakers (2018)

### October 9

- The Painted Bird (2019)
- The Last Black Man in San Francisco (2019)
- Trang Quynh (2019)
- Killbird (2019)
- Faith Based (2020)
- AK-47 (2020)

### October 10

- Assassins (2020)

### October 16

- The Professor and the Madman (2019)
- Wife of a Spy (2020)
- Demon Slayer the Movie: Mugen Train (2020)

- Awaydays (2009)
- Dying to Survive (2018)

### October 17

- Laces (2018)
- Ainu Mosir (2020)

### October 23

- Living in Your Sky (2020)
- Destroyer (2018)
- The Keeper (2018)
- Once Were Brothers: Robbie Robertson and the Band (2019)
- Mother (2019)
- True Mothers (2020)
- Start-Up (2019)
- Your Eyes Tell (2020)
- Dounika naru hibi (2020)

### October 28

- Malibu Road (2020)

### October 30

- The Hunt (2020)
- 3 from Hell (2019)
- Wolfwalkers (2020)
- The Vigil (2019)
- Papicha (2019)
- Why Don't You Just Die! (2018)
- Koko-di Koko-da (2019)

### October 31

- The Antenna (2019)
- Prey (2019)

## GAMES

### October 2

- Star Wars: Squadrons (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time (PS4, Xbox One)

### October 6

- Baldur's Gate 3 – Early Access (PC, Stadia)

### October 8

- Ride 4 (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Ikenfell (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- I Am Dead (PC, Switch)

### October 9

- FIFA 21 (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### October 13

- Remothered: Broken Porcelain (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### October 14

- Partisans 1941 (PC)

### October 15

- Age of Empires 3: Definitive Edition (PC)
- Craftlands Workshoppe – Steam Early Access (PC)
- Cake Bash (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Stadia)

### October 16

- 9 Monkeys of Shaolin (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### October 21

- Scourgebringer (PC, Xbox One, Switch)

### October 23

- Transformers Battlegrounds (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

### October 27

- Ghostrunner (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Trails of Cold Steel 4 (PS4)
- World of Warcraft: Shadowlands (PC)

### October 28

- AGOS: A Game of Space (Rift, Vive, Index)

### October 29

- Watch Dogs: Legion (PC, PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PS5, Xbox Series S/X)

### October 30

- The Dark Pictures – Little Hope (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Pikmin 3 Deluxe (Switch)

### Unspecified Date

- Transient (PC, PS4, Xbox One)
- Second Extinction – Steam Early Access (PC)

Sources:

<https://www.imdb.com/calendar/?region=jp>

<https://www.vg247.com/2020/02/18/video-game-release-dates-2020/>



Rebecca Paterson  
(Kyoto)

## 愛や復讐のために

### THREE HAUNTING TALES TO START YOUR HYAKU MONOGATARI

Cooler temperatures, crisp autumn skies, and shorter days—the traditional spooky season of Japan has long passed with the end of Obon in mid-August, but, for many of us, this gradual decline into the lifelessness of winter brings with it the anticipation for our own festival of the dead. For this year's Halloween, how about something a little different? Japan is well known as a country of rich paranormal traditions, diverse folklore, and terrifying filmography that both haunts and delights the imaginations of all. For those of us who enjoy the thrill of fear, one ghost story isn't enough. But what about one hundred?

*Hyaku Monogatari* (lit. one hundred stories) is a form of entertainment that grew in popularity during the Edo Period (1603-1868). A group of friends would bring a mirror into a dark room, then light one hundred different candles around it—though nowadays electric lights, TVs, and phones also suffice. One by one, each person would tell a ghost story. Upon finishing each story, a light would be extinguished.

Much like a seance, tension, excitement, and fear escalate with anticipation as the room slowly dims. When all 100 frightening tales have been completed and the storytellers are finally enveloped in darkness, a spectre is said to appear in the mirror.

If you'd like to try *Hyaku Monogatari* yourself this Halloween, here are three of Japan's extraordinary supernatural tales to start you off:

## YOTSUYA KAIDAN

In Yotsuya, Tokyo, there was once a masterless samurai named Iyemon who desired to marry a beautiful woman, Oiwa. However, her father was aware of Iyemon's unsavory character and refused his request. In a rage, Iyemon murdered her and blamed the crime on bandits. Iyemon then convinced Oiwa to marry him by promising to avenge her father's death.

Their marriage was not a happy one. Growing increasingly frustrated with his life of poverty, Iyemon began to direct his pent-up anger onto Oiwa. As his feelings of resentment grew, he began an affair with a wealthier woman, Oume. Together, they conspired to murder Oiwa in order to marry. Oume prepared some poison and Iyemon then gave it to Oiwa, claiming it was makeup. However, the poison did not kill Oiwa, and instead left her face mangled and bleeding; her left eye began to sag, her skin scarred, and her hair fell out. Disappointed with his failed attempt to kill her and growing disgusted with his wife's face, Iyemon bribed a local man, Takuetsu, to rape Oiwa to provide a grounds for divorce. On the night Takuetsu attempted to commit his crime, he

was put off by Oiwa's ghastly appearance. In response to her disbelief, Takuetsu showed her a mirror, and she flew into a rage, grabbed the nearest sword, and attempted to kill him. In the ensuing struggle, Oiwa fell and cut her own throat.

Iyemon finally succeeded with his engagement to Oume, but on the night of their wedding an apparition of Oiwa appeared before him. Panicked, he unsheathed his sword and cut off the spectre's head—before the vision disappeared, revealing the decapitated body of Oume. Iyemon was shocked at his heinous mistake and fled the room. Before him, again, appeared Oiwa, and, again, he slashed at the phantom. This time, however, Iyemon had slain his father-in-law. With no way to redeem himself, Iyemon purged his bride's family and fled from the town. Wherever he went, he was pursued by the ghost of Oiwa, her face manifesting in lanterns, and her dishevelled hair attempting to ensnare him.

Descending into madness, Iyemon fled into the forest, where he was eventually hunted down and killed by his brother-in-law.

It is said that Oiwa still haunts to this day.

*Yotsuya Kaidan's* ghastly imagery and relentless haunting of the wronged Oiwa make this one of, if not the most, famous ghost stories in Japan. First told in a masterful and grisly Kabuki production, *Yotsuya Kaidan* gripped the imagination of the masses of the 19th century. Even now, Oiwa's image has defined what we associate with modern Japanese ghosts—vengeful, unrelenting, and grotesque.





## BOTAN DŌRŌ

On the first night of *Obon* many years ago, a man named Hagiwara Shinzaburo was out walking, enjoying the local festivities. On his way home through the dark woods, he saw a peony lantern moving slowly in his direction. The owner was a maid accompanying her mistress—a young, beautiful woman—on a nighttime stroll. He was immediately enchanted by this woman, Otsuyu. They arranged to meet again, and before long, Hagiwara and Otsuyu had fallen passionately in love and spent every night together.

One night, a neighbour, woken by the light of the peony lantern and concerned at Hagiwara's visibly deteriorating health, went to visit Hagiwara's dwelling. Peeping through a gap in the sliding doors, he saw Hagiwara nestled in the bones of a skeleton. Terrified of the sight, the neighbour hurried to find a Buddhist priest for advice. The priest warned Hagiwara of the perils of mingling with the dead and gave him a talisman to protect his home against evil spirits. It proved to be effective.

Distraught with being separated from her love, Otsuyu came to Hagiwara every night, calling his name beneath his window and beckoning him to reunite with her. Eventually, Hagiwara was no longer able to resist the temptation and left the safety of his home. He disappeared into the night. The next morning, his body was found laying over a gravestone, embracing the skeleton of a young woman.



*Botan Doro* (lit. The Peony Lantern) originated in China as one story of the Buddhist moral text "Jiandeng Xinhua." It came to Japan in the 17th century and rose in popularity after its publication in Asai Ryōi's "Otogī Bōko." Part of its popularity was thanks to its unique balance between passion and horror—juxtaposing beauty and romance with terror and death. Beginning with what sounds like a delightful love story, the story transforms with the neighbour's nighttime investigation, shocking audiences with the striking image of a human skeleton. Some audiences may have even felt sympathetic to Otsuyu—unable to move on and stuck lingering in the world of the living in hopes of finding love. All these emotions make *Botan Dōrō* an unforgettable tale.



## MUJINA

Long ago, on Akasaka road, Tokyo, there was a slope called *Kii-no-kuni-zaka*. On one side was an imperial residence surrounded by a deep, wide, old moat. After nightfall, the slope was poorly lit, so the darkness was quite unnerving. Despite its convenience as a shortcut, people would avoid this slope because of the *mujina*, and the most recent account is as follows:

One night, an old merchant was hurrying up the slope when he saw a woman by the moat, weeping profusely into her kimono sleeves. Afraid that she might be contemplating drowning herself, the merchant ran over to see what was wrong. She ignored his questions and continued sobbing, so instead, the man urged her to go home, fearful of what might be lurking in the dark. She slowly turned around, still covering her face, and turned towards him. She slowly removed her sleeve from her face and revealed nothing—no eyes, no mouth, no nose. The man screamed and scrambled up the slope, fleeing into the darkness. Not once looking back, he eventually saw a light ahead and ran over to it, only to find a soba-seller setting up a stall for the night. The seller, concerned, asked him what was wrong and whether the merchant had been attacked, to which the merchant replied that he had only been scared. The soba-seller asked what scared him, but the merchant could not explain what it was.



“Was it something like this?” asked the soba-seller, stroking his face and revealing a smooth surface with no features.

The lantern went out.

This version of the *mujina*, also known as *nopperabō*, came to prominence thanks to its inclusion in Lafcadio Hearn’s famous collection of ghost stories—“*Kaidan*” (1904). Although the *mujina* initially appears as a beautiful young woman, evoking imagery from stories like *Yotsuya Kaidan* and *Botan Dōrō*, this may not be the true form of the *mujina*. In fact, many would not call her a ghost at all. The *mujina* can shapeshift—we see it here as both the young woman and the male soba-seller. Rather than being classified as a ghost (*yūrei*), the *mujina* is a monster or ghoul (*yōkai*), much like the *kappa* or the *rokurokubi*.

Now you have the first three of your 100 tales. Will you move onto the fourth? For those who do, when you go to turn off the final light, just be wary of what might be lurking in the darkness, listening to your stories. . . .

*Rebecca Paterson is a first-year PhD student living in Kyoto. After studying Japanese Studies in the UK and finishing her undergraduate studies with a dissertation about Japanese ghosts, she came to Japan to pursue her passion for language-learning and psychology. Rebecca still enjoys a good ghost story but can't bring herself to watch any films because the visuals are too scary.*



# Japanese Manhole Cover

## Designs:

A Bureaucrat's  
Surprise Gift

Sabrina  
Hassanali  
(Tokyo)

Bureaucrats are not known for creating trends. In Japan, however, a clever public funding move opened the door to some uniquely Japanese manhole art. Here in Japan, a bureaucrat suggested creating designs for manhole covers in an effort to generate public funding for sewer upgrades. The construction industry minister in question, Yasutake Kameda, should be remembered as a creative PR strategist. Today, Japanese manhole covers are a source of artistic inspiration and community.

After the Second World War, Japan underwent an upgrade to its sewer systems. In order to get up to speed, the government wanted towns to pay for the modernization of sewers. It was a costly endeavor, and officials were tasked with coming up with a plan to raise money for the upgrades. Municipalities were happy to pay for decorated manhole covers. Thanks to Mr. Kameda's suggestion for decorative sewer covers, a unique public art aesthetic was born.

Naha in Okinawa is believed to have the first decorative manhole cover design, created in 1977. By the 1980s, manhole covers were all the rage. Now, there are approximately 12,000 manhole designs across Japan, with nearly 95% of municipalities having their own special manhole cover designs. A dedicated factory manufactures these gorgeous covers. Take a look at the Japanese Manhole video from "WAORYU! ONLY in JAPAN" for a detailed description of the unique manufacturing process of these 50-kg chunks of pure metal. Manhole covers, while elegant, are heavy! It is amazing to watch these barren slabs come to life when they are hand-filled with vibrant colors by dedicated artists. Creative attention to detail really has no limit in Japan.

It was my passion for flowers that initially led me to notice Tokyo's ubiquitous sakura manhole covers. In April 2020, I was a bit bummed that the COVID pandemic essentially stole the hanami season. This year, the public parks in Tokyo prohibited the annual gatherings of large groups under the cherry blossom trees. As I walked around Tokyo on my own instead, I found myself looking down





at the streets. I started to notice that this metal sakura flower kept showing up. Sometimes it was on asphalt, other times on concrete. It is from there that I became curious about the other sewer covers. From there, thanks to the internet, I fell down a rabbit hole of manhole mania.

The designs featured on Japanese manhole covers vary greatly based on their location. Many motifs are based on famous cultural sights or a prefecture's flora and fauna. Around Mt. Fuji, for example, many cities include vistas of the renowned mountain in the background. Some views are of Mt. Fuji seen across a bay or behind a train line. Japan's favorite flower, the cherry blossom, is also found on an enormous number of manhole covers. Typical Japanese landscapes, festival scenes, and boats are other common motifs. Contemporary manhole cover designs include anime characters, Hello Kitty, and other popular mascots.

In recent years, there is a growing trend bringing the community together around a passion for manhole covers. In the Tokyo area, an annual event unites enthusiasts to walk through streets looking for manhole covers. One enthusiast, Mr. Hidekazu Yamada, created a spectacular deck of manhole cover cards in 2016. Each card in the deck features a specific manhole cover with GPS coordinates. On the back of each card, the history and significance of the cover design are explained. Even fancy Japanese department stores have caught the manhole cover bug. In 2019, Shinjuku's Takashimaya held an exhibition highlighting some fun designs.

Japanese manhole covers are a source of artistic inspiration and community.

Of course, leave it to Japan to create an array of manhole cover products. If you missed your chance to pick up manhole cover goods in person, Tokyo Ground has you covered! Infrastructure geekdom is a thing in Japan, and the minutiae of the sewer hole covers make them an aesthetic way to celebrate Japan in its typical weird and wonderful way. Our product designs are fun celebrations of this unique art. Whether you are lounging at home with your family or video-conferencing your co-workers, Tokyo Ground designs will leave an impression, and you will enjoy explaining your choice of design to those less well-informed!

Until you get a chance to take a stroll down some of Japan's many back alleys, pick which manhole cover style jives with you on Tokyo Ground. For **CONNECT** readers, use the discount code "CONNECT" to get 20% off your entire order! Valid through November 14, 2020. Tokyo Ground with Discount.

*Sabrina Hassanali is a former JET who lives in Tokyo. She enjoys a healthy work-life balance, misses Tex-Mex food, and appreciates adventures by bike. Sabrina was inspired by Japanese manhole covers and now designs T-shirts at [www.tokyoground.com](http://www.tokyoground.com).*



# PHYSICAL DIGGING IN A DIGITAL MUSIC ERA

TRUE POPULARITY OF JAPANESE MUSIC AS SEEN  
THROUGH THE LENS OF THE USED VINYL BIN

Walk into the vinyl section of any Japanese second-hand store, such as Hardoff, and you'll be greeted by a selection of western classics, an even larger selection of jazz and fusion, and lastly, a plethora of Japanese music. Chances are, aside from one or two, most of the Japanese artists will be virtually unheard of by a western audience. The Japanese vinyl on offer usually spans the 70s to 80s, including a range of sonic styles that ebb and flow with influences from both the West and Japan.

Genre boundaries are always a bit nebulous, but traditional Japanese standard pop of the 70s and 80s is called *kayoukyoku* (Showa-era pop), and more western-leaning pop is referred to as J-pop or "pops." "City pop" is another loose subgenre that is defined more by its vibe than any specific sound. It echoed the extravagance of life in the city and the maturity of a country that was rapidly becoming a tech and finance powerhouse. The term was originally used in the 70s and 80s but isn't commonly known among Japanese people now. In the past few years, the genre has been experiencing a huge increase in popularity in the West. City pop was heavily influenced by soft rock, disco, boogie, and soul, and it was frequently packaged with tropical designs and summery imagery. The Doobie Brothers, Earth, Wind & Fire, early Sade and Janet Jackson have all made songs that neared the city pop sound and feeling.

While city pop names like Mariya Takeuchi, Tatsuro Yamashita, or Anri, (darlings of the YouTube "Up next" algorithm) are just beginning to poke into the consciousness of casual music listeners located in the West, they had already captured the attention of record collectors long ago. Mariya Takeuchi's most famous song (at least according to plays on YouTube) is "[Plastic Love](#)," with a

NATHAN PORT (YAMAGATA)





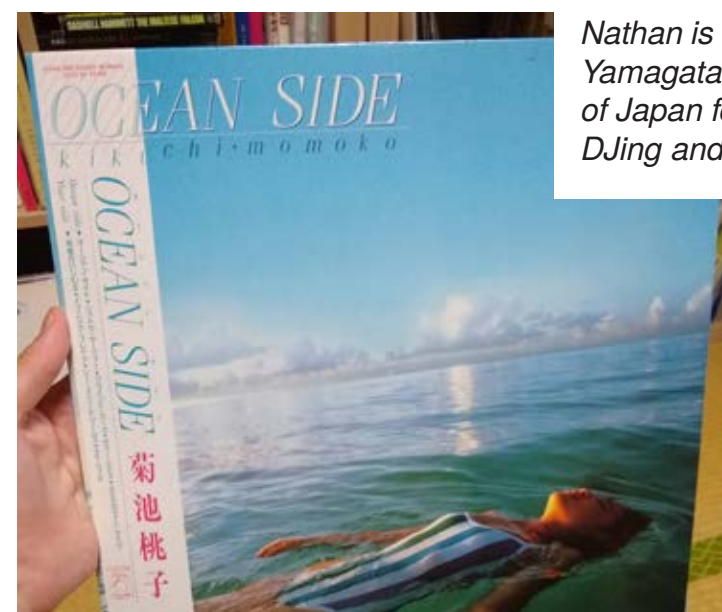
**THUMBING THROUGH RECORDS IN THE JAPANESE VINYL SECTION IS OFTEN A BETTER INDICATOR OF WHAT IS TRULY POPULAR THAN RELYING ON YOUTUBE OR ONLINE RECORD SALE PRICES.**

view count of over 75 million spread over a handful of videos. Since “Plastic Love” has blown up online, the price of its physical media has also skyrocketed. Complete copies of the “Variety,” the album that it’s on, in decent condition sell for around 10,000 yen. This price doesn’t reflect the scarcity of the record ([popular vinyl marketplace Discogs lists over 10 copies for sale](#)) but rather the high levels of demand. This price trend is seen across the board for singles and albums that have recently become popular on YouTube.

Shifting to more obscure and less highly sought-after titles, you’ll find city pop albums that have sold for even more, such as Tohoku Shinkansen’s “[Thru Traffic](#)” or Piper’s “[Summer Breeze](#),” two summery treats that easily command northwards of 20,000 yen. That said, the cult collector’s status attained by Japanese artists in the past few years doesn’t mean the majority of canonical, important, or otherwise high quality releases are out of reach for the typical listener or collector. Many of the most influential releases of the 70s and 80s were in high demand, and the surge in prices for a select few records doesn’t necessarily reflect what was popular at that time.



Thumbing through records in the Japanese vinyl section is often a better indicator of what is truly popular than relying on YouTube or online record sale prices. Stores like Hardoff often receive their used inventory from individuals who are moving or clearing out their houses. The selections usually represent portions of collections from average listeners. While there may only be the stray copy of albums with recently discovered city pop hits (even those that don’t sell for astronomical prices), one can often find an excess of Japanese “pops”



and kayoukyoku superstars like Yumi Matsutoya and Momoe Yamaguchi, who are still relatively unknown outside of Japan. It’s easy to find good condition records by these artists for less than 2000 yen.

A quick check on most influential lists of Japanese artists confirms what the used vinyl bin inventory shows. HMV’s 2003 “[Top 100 Japanese Pops Artists](#)” places Yumi at #3 and Momoe at #7. A few city pop stars make the cut (Tatsuro Yamashita is at #6 and Mariya Takeuchi at #26) but others, including Anri, are excluded entirely. Yumi’s relative obscurity in the West is made even more surprising by the fact that a number of her songs were later used in the Ghibli movies [Kiki’s Delivery Service](#) and [The Wind Rises](#). When I moved to Japan, I asked my coworkers for music recommendations. Time and time again, Yumi and Momoe were mentioned, and my teachers seemed honestly surprised that I wasn’t familiar with them considering I knew artists like Mariya Takeuchi.

The delineation between city pop artists and those making other forms of Japanese pop isn’t as rigid as it may seem from the current emphasis and resurgence of the “city pop” genre in the West. Many Japanese people may be familiar with some of the artists involved but probably associate them with the big city sound of the 80s as opposed to the genre of city pop specifically. Artists blurred the lines themselves: Yumi and Momoe made a few albums that heavily featured city pop sounds, and Mariya and Anri made a number of albums in a more standard kayoukyoku style.

It’s easy to understand the current appeal of city pop; the mix of western styles and tropical aesthetic is approachable and groovy, but its current appeal suggests a level of popularity which it did not rise to when it was first released. Filtering and listening to music from eras gone by has certainly exposed some gems to a new audience, but it has also reinterpreted and crafted perceptions of a genre that aren’t historically accurate. If you want to connect with the mainstream sounds of the time, avoid the digital trappings of contextless singles, and check the physical releases near you.

*Nathan is a second-year ALT from the USA living in Sagae City, Yamagata Prefecture. When he is not scouring the far corners of Japan for vinyl goodies, he enjoys hiking and also dabbles in DJing and hosting events.*



EXITING THE TUNNEL WAS LIKE COMING OUT OF A DAYDREAM AND BACK INTO REALITY, A STARTLING REMINDER OF WHERE I WAS AND WHAT I WAS DOING WHEN I WASN'T ADMIRING ODD SPACE TOILETS IN TUNNELS.

# JOURNEY THROUGH THE CENTER OF LIGHT

## ECHIGO TSUMARI TRIENNALE

### Linka Wade (Gunma)

Kiyotsu Gorge in Tokamachi, Niigata is one of the “Three Great Gorges of Japan” along with Kurobe Gorge in Toyoma and Osugidani Gorge in Mie. It was designated as a National Place of Scenic Beauty and Natural Monument in 1941, and was incorporated into Joshin’etsu Kogen National Park in 1949.

The gorge has very distinctive geology, being one of the foremost places in Japan to see beautiful columnar jointing—a geological effect where cooled magma is pushed up to form stunning vertical pillars of rock. The gorge was closed to visitors in 1988 because of a deadly falling rocks incident, but was reopened when the Kiyotsu Gorge Tunnel was completed in 1996. Visitors could use the tunnel to more safely enjoy the scenery of the valley.

In 2018, the tunnel was revitalized by Chinese artist Ma Yansong. With the help of the MAD Architects group, the tunnel was transformed into a 750 meter long art installation and became the crown jewel of the Echigo-Yuzawa Art Field, which is also the site of the Echigo Tsumari Triennale being held now.

### Entering the Tunnel

The area around Kiyotsu Gorge gives no hint as to what is actually in the tunnel. The drive to the gorge is lovely, winding through mountains and along the river, past small farms and rural houses. After parking, you walk through a small onsen town area. There are historic buildings with snacks and omiyage, and small hot spring inns to stay at. Even when you first enter the tunnel, nothing seems unusual. There’s an area explaining the geologic history of the region shortly after entering, and an outlook highlighting the columnar jointing of the valley a little further in. That’s when things start to change. The tunnel gets dimmer, and is lit with sections of bright color—blocks of green, blue, yellow and magenta all flowing into each other. Each part of the tunnel installation corresponds to an element—wood, earth, metal, fire, and water. These colored sections of the tunnel are supposed to help define the lookout points, and signify each element represented.



“The Drop”

“The Light Cave”



### The Second Lookout

The first area past the basic overlook is another window into the gorge. It’s brightly lit, and seems simple, except for a mysterious silver pod in the middle of the room. The pod is completely reflective, and looks like a creatively parked spaceship. The installation is called the “Invisible Bubble” and represents the metal element. In reality, this is no lost alien transport. It’s a toilet. The outside is completely reflective and can’t be looked into, but a person sitting inside can clearly see the outside. It’s . . . an interesting experience to use the toilet and be able to watch the people around you wander around and investigate the pod you’re sitting in, to say the least.





### The Third Lookout

The next lookout is an area covered in circular mirrors backed by an orange glow. This area is called “The Drop” and represents fire. If you have trypophobia (a fear of closely-packed holes), this definitely isn’t the room for you. After you get over the weirdness of the whole effect, it’s fun to play with looking at the people and views around you through all the mirrors.

### The Final Lookout

The final lookout is the panorama view, and is named “The Light Cave.” Without a doubt, this is the highlight of the entire installation. The Light Cave represents water. It’s a wide room that looks out on a stunning view of the entire valley. The sides and roof are covered with reflective stainless steel and there is a stone pool of shallow water spanning across most of the room. When you stand in the center, the landscape is reflected in all dimensions around you, making you feel both enclosed and like you’re standing on the brink of something incredibly open and wide. It’s an illusion of being both inside and out at the same time—bringing something huge in to make it small, and stunning you with its magnitude when it’s viewed without reflection.

### Emerging from the Tunnel

The walk back out of the tunnel was strange. Walking past the installations knowing what they would be lent me an entirely different outlook from encountering them for the first time. I couldn’t get the view from the Light Cave out of my head, and wished I could have stood there to admire it all for longer. Exiting the tunnel was like coming out of a daydream and back into reality, a startling reminder of where I was and what I was doing when I wasn’t admiring odd space toilets in tunnels. My only regret was arriving too late in the day to see the installation for the final element, wood. The visitor’s center and cafe located outside the tunnel has a footbath on the upper floor where the roof is made of cedar, and spirals upwards to a reflective mirror at the apex. This installation is called “the Periscope.” Perhaps in the fall, I’ll take another wander through it all again.

The Tunnel of Light costs 800 to enter and is open from 8:30 to 5, last entry is at 4:30. Parking is free. For more information, you can visit this [website](#).



Looking out of the “Invisible Bubble”

**It’s . . . an interesting experience to use the toilet and be able to watch the people around you wander around and investigate the pod you’re sitting in, to say the least.**

*Linka Wade is a third year ALT in Gunma prefecture from Monterey, California. She lives with her husband and two guinea pigs deep in the inaka. In her free time she loves traveling and exploring onsen. You can get out her blog [here](#) or on Instagram @linkaslens.*





## Halloween Artober Prompts

JULIA STASIO (TOKYO ALUMNUS)

Happy October! I am so excited to have the opportunity to write about *Artober* for **CONNECT**. My name is Julia and I am an artist currently living in Tokyo. Prior to now, I worked as an ALT for the JET Programme from 2016-2019 at a wonderful arts and performing arts high school in Shinjuku. I really enjoyed my time as a JET ALT, and I was so grateful to have the opportunity to teach so many talented young artists.

I graduated from Massachusetts College of Art and Design in the USA with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in illustration. My time in college made me completely fall in love with illustration. Since graduating, I have been displaying my work in galleries in Japan and the USA, exploring the beautiful country of Japan (when it is safe to do so), and making a lot of artwork. I work primarily in watercolor, but I sometimes like to explore working in graphite and digital media. General themes that I am inspired by include nature, the circle of life, and our solar system.



A Passion for Halloween

Something else that makes me very excited and inspired is Halloween season. This year, I am so happy to announce that I have created my own prompt list for Artober. Artober is an event where artists create one piece of artwork for each day in October. In previous years this has been better known as *Inktober*, but the hashtag has been changed this year for a variety of reasons, most importantly for the claim that the key person who coined the term Inktober recently plagiarized a book idea from a black artist without giving them credit. Every day there will be a different Halloween-related word that you can make an illustration based off of. My prompt list for Artober contains many Halloween-inspired words. When coming up with my prompt list, I really wanted to make a combination of classic Halloween themes such as “ghost” or “witch,” and mix in some words to encourage conceptual art as well, such as “superstition” and “crisp.”

Halloween Arttober Prompts

I will write all thirty-one prompts here so that it's easy to read. Days 1-31 are:

- 01 SPOOKED

02 PATCH

03 STAIRS

04 SWEET

05 IMAGINARY

06 GHOST

07 BEADY

08 RING

09 YOKAI

10 CHARM

11 FANG

12 TAROT

13 SUPERSTITION

14 WITCH

15 SLIVER
- 16 NEW

17 BAD LUCK

18 BONES

19 HIDE AND SEEK

20 SHADOW

21 RITUAL

22 BAT

23 LITTLE DOOR

24 SPELL

25 WEB

26 SPIRIT

27 CRISP

28 ILLUMINATE

29 BLACK CAT

30 COSTUME

31 TRICK OR TREAT







If you wish to participate, please use the hashtag #KumorilunaArtober so that I can see your work! You can post on any social media that you would like. I will be checking the tag on Instagram and Twitter every day during October. I would be so happy if artists all around Japan and all around the world could join in. There are no strict rules or deadlines, and all art mediums are accepted. The point of this Arttober is to spread Halloween cheer, not to be worried about completing the entire list, so there is no pressure to finish all thirty-one days. Even just one or two days is perfectly accepted and welcomed! Hopefully some of the words on this list inspire you to create some awesome artwork. I am looking forward to seeing your creations!

In this article, I am so happy to share a preview of my Arttober works, including my pieces for Day 1—"Spooked," Day 2—"Patch" and Day 9—"Yokai." I will be posting more work like this in October, so please check out my social media accounts below if you are interested.

You can find me on [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#) for my latest Arttober updates. I update my personal website with new work pretty frequently and that can be viewed [here](#).

I also have a [Patreon](#) where you can access process photos, explanations of different pieces, and even sign up to receive monthly prints. And lastly, as I am sure most people in Japan reading this use LINE, if you are looking for some cute and sort of creepy line stickers, please check out my 'Everyday Yokai' LINE sticker collection, available in the LINE sticker shop [here](#).

Thank you so much for reading, and Happy Halloween!



*Julia Stasio is a JET alumnus and artist living in Tokyo. She especially loves watercolor illustration and traveling throughout Japan. You can view her work on all the accounts listed above, see her in art exhibitions around Japan, and also purchase her new set of stickers on Line.*



# LIFESTYLE

## WELLNESS EDITOR

[connect.health@ajet.net](mailto:connect.health@ajet.net)

## Clare Braganza

*"One day you're young, and the next you have a favourite grocery store" — Unknown*

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## SPORTS EDITOR

[connect.sports@ajet.net](mailto:connect.sports@ajet.net)

## Kayla Francis

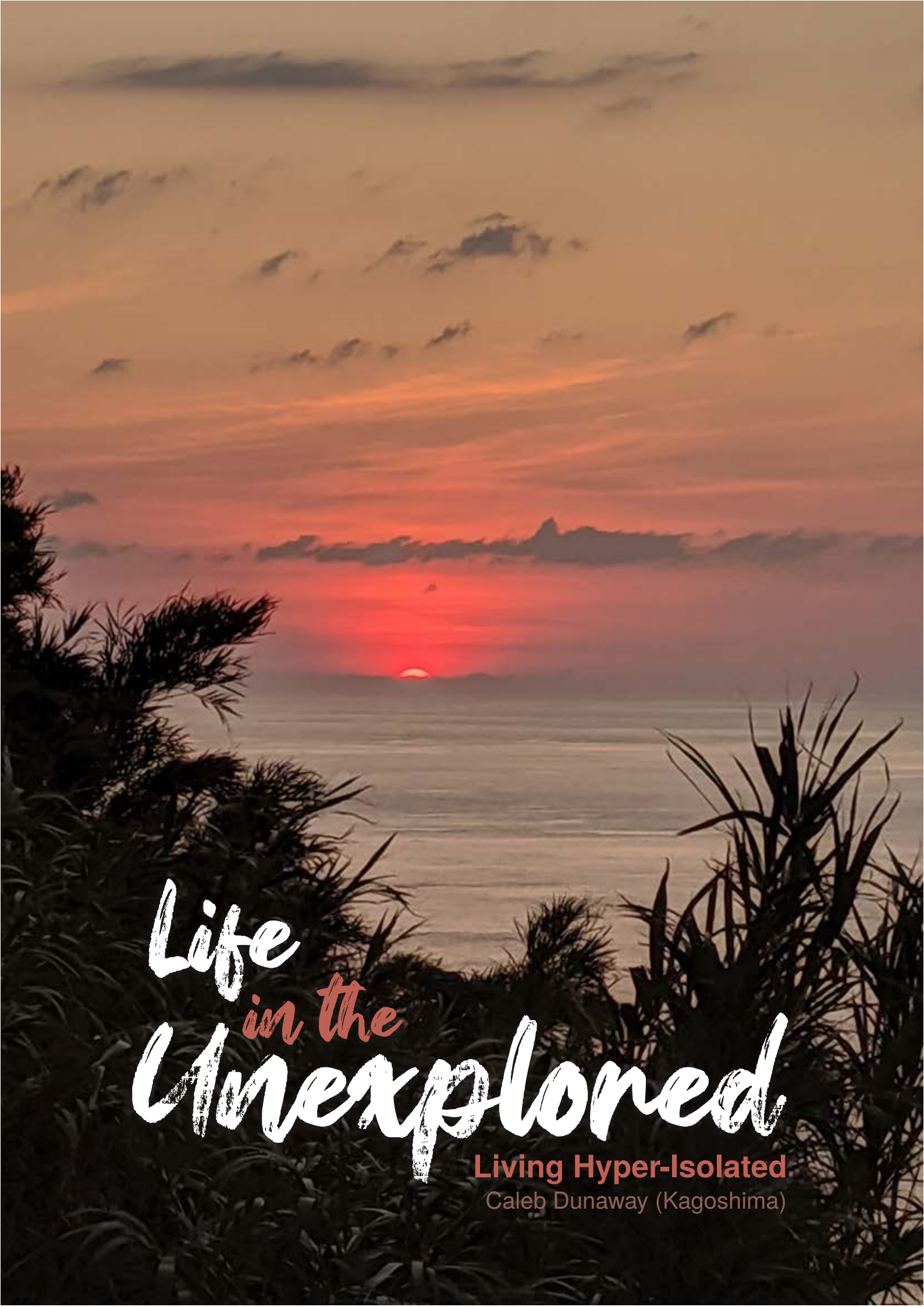
*"Your body is not a temple, it's an amusement park. Enjoy the ride." — Anthony Bourdain, "Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly"*

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## LIFESTYLE DESIGNER

Rhiannon Haseltine





# Life *in the* Unexplored

Living Hyper-Isolated  
Caleb Dunaway (Kagoshima)

South of Yakushima and North of Amami Oshima, deep in Kagoshima prefecture, sits Japan's longest "village" Toshima. Toshima Village, known as "Japan's last unexplored region", is a group of 7 inhabited islands and 5 uninhabited islands that altogether make up the Tokara Archipelago. The inhabited islands include, from north to south, Kuchinoshima, Nakanoshima, Suwanosejima, Tairajima, Akusekijima, Kodakarajima, and Tokarajima. I live on Tairajima, the centermost as well as second-smallest inhabited island. The population of Tairajima is a mere 89 people. Like most islands in Toshima, it is the leftover of a now inactive volcano. Surprisingly, there is an ALT on each of the inhabited islands in Toshima. Our schools are combined elementary and junior high schools with the largest number of students being 17 in any school.

Life in Toshima isn't quite like most other placements on JET. There are no airports or active charters in Toshima, making the only way on and off the islands a ferry that runs twice a week—if the weather is good. There are no conbinis, grocery stores, or gas stations in Toshima. The only way we get food is by ordering our groceries online which come on the Saturday ferry. Tairajima, being the centermost island, is 9.5 hours away from both Kagoshima City and Amami Oshima.

As I'm sure you can imagine, a placement in Toshima comes with its own challenges and hurdles to grapple with, social isolation being one of the hardest. Being the only foreigner and living on an island consisting mostly of older people has been an exercise in both patience and figuring out how to spend time by myself. Like most JETs, I had compiled a



*There are no conbinis, grocery stores,  
or gas stations in Toshima.*





general list of the things I wanted to do and places I wanted to go while on the Program. But, even before Covid-19, because I'm placed so far away from any sizable city or airport and limited to the twice-a-week ferry, it's been difficult—if not impossible—to tick off my bucket list. Touching on the current pandemic, luckily Covid-19 has barely affected my island life: due to the small population I can go walking, trekking in the jungle, and swimming at the beach just as often as before.

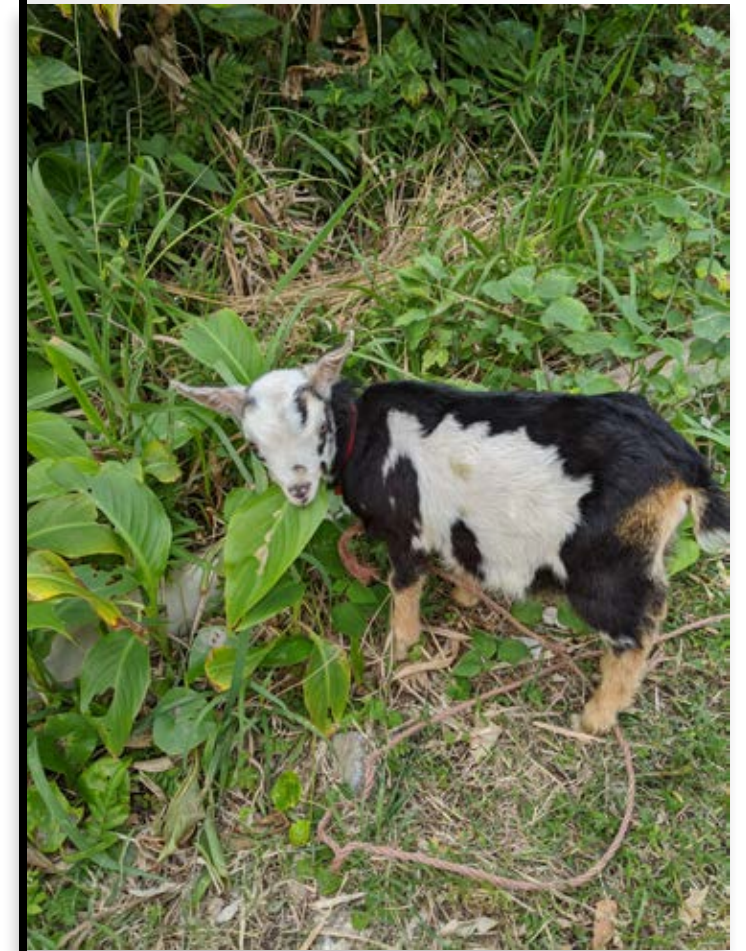
Living in such an isolated place has taught me that finding what makes your placement special (something you can experience that others living elsewhere can't) is crucial to both gaining an appreciation for your surroundings as well as handling being away from the people you know. A few of the things I've come to appreciate about my small island are the deserted beaches where you can go swimming, the incredible year-

round fishing, the beautiful sunsets, and the local festivals that you can't find anywhere else in Japan. One such annual festival is Kasedauchi; an islander dresses up as the local deity, the Futtokojin, and comes to each house to eat sushi, drink sake, and then rub black ink on your face as a sign of good luck for the year. While the Futtokojin is travelling between houses, children run out from hiding places to drench the deity with buckets of water.

Another necessary practice I've found in dealing with the isolation is spending your time in ways that you enjoy. I've spent this time continuing to learn Japanese, as well as picking up hobbies I didn't have time for in the past. It helps if you are genuinely interested in what you are doing to pass the time. I've experimented with multiple different hobbies trying to find things that I both enjoy and can share with my neighbors and coworkers, one of the big ones being gardening. This year I planted habanero and jalapeno peppers. Unfortunately, only two habaneros came up and only one has fruited so far. But I've had a lot of fun figuring out what I did wrong this year as well as talking to my neighbors about what they suggest growing. I've planned out next year's garden and am looking forward to sharing the spoils of my hard work with my fellow islanders.

Fishing is another hobby I've picked up thanks to the islanders. Growing up in Tennessee, a land-locked state, I never really had a chance to do much sea fishing. For the islanders however, fishing is an interesting mixture between a hobby and a way of life. They've taught me what fish are in season, what is edible and what isn't, as well as the different types of lures used for certain fish. They've also taught me how to make my own sashimi, which is something I'll have a hard time giving up after I leave the island.

While finding the time to take up new hobbies is important, I've found that making the time to continue hobbies you had before JET is just as, if not more, important. Before coming to Tairajima I spent a lot of time reading, hiking, and playing video games. Living the island life has given me just as much time to pursue those hobbies as well. Luckily there are no snakes living on this island, so I go on near-weekly hikes up into the jungle on my island. The expansive banyan trees create a cathedral effect throughout the jungle which echoes the sounds of the birds and goats moving about. I've even purchased a hammock I take into the jungle and hang in when it's not unbearably hot. Along with hiking, I also try and spend a little time every weekend playing games online with my friends back home. Unfortunately, we are in the midst of typhoon season at the moment, so it's not uncommon for the WiFi to go out and be out for days on end. But, I try to make the most of my time disconnected and either read or study some more Japanese.



While hobbies are good for keeping you occupied and focused on things other than being alone, I've realized that they can never really replace interacting with others. Despite taking up new hobbies and continuing old ones, I've still found myself desperately missing my family and friends as well as just going out to restaurants or stores to be around other people. There really is no replacement for being around people. Talking to my family and friends a few times a week and planning out the times out in advance helps me both feel a bit less out of the loop.

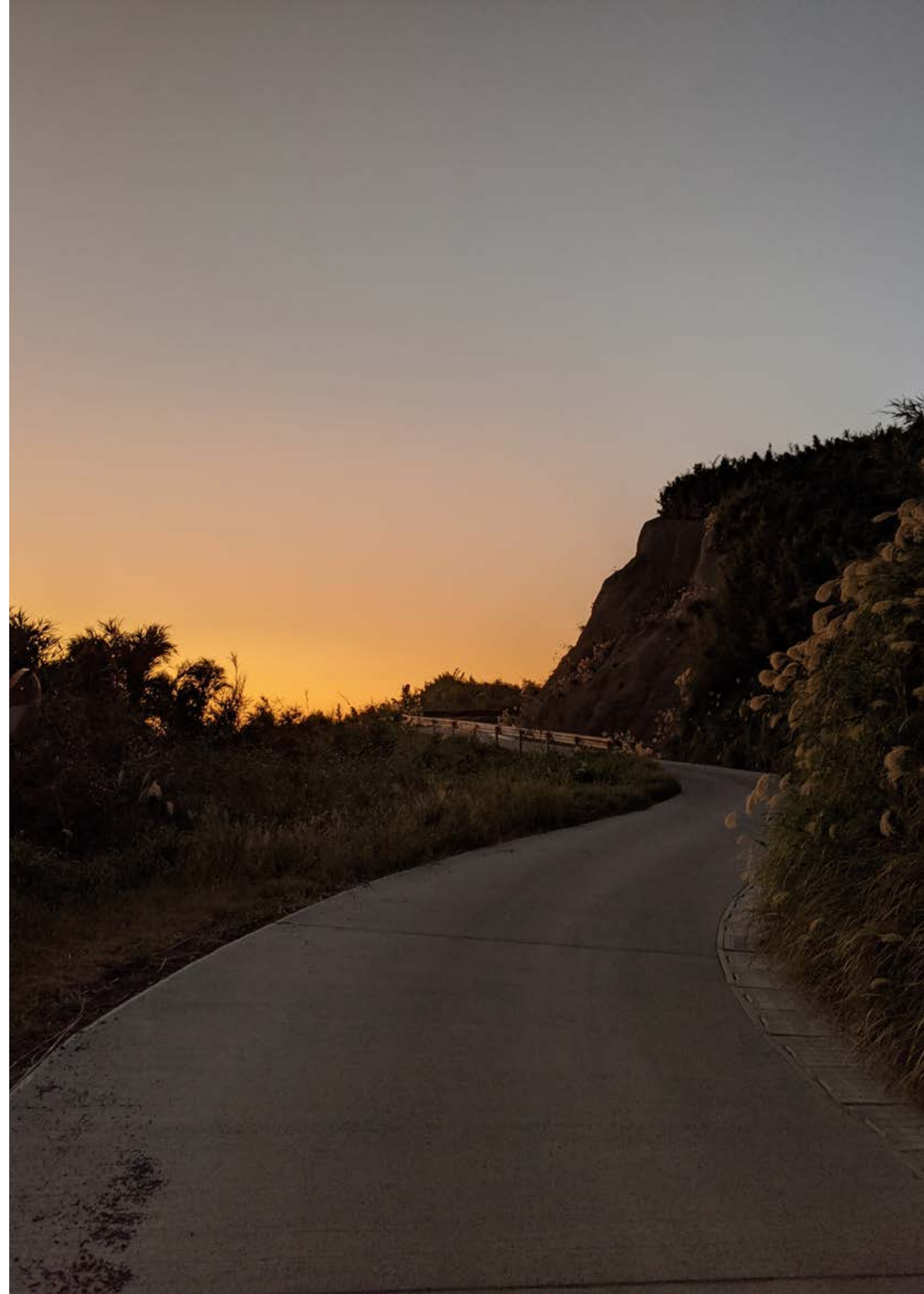
I'm also constantly thinking about my next trip off the island. Whether it's just to simply hop on the ferry one weekend to visit an ALT on another island, or planning out next year's Golden Week vacation. I try to keep myself focused on the future. I also spend lots of time planning and prepping for my post-JET move.



Unfortunately however, there are no “quick fixes” for social-isolation. Living in a foreign country, especially on a barely inhabited speck of land, will inevitably cause you to feel incredibly isolated and separate from the world you’re used to. As with any negative feeling, it’s necessary to first acknowledge it and understand that it’s a totally normal feeling. And although it’s inevitable, there are definitely things that can be done to lessen the feeling and help you move past it once it arrives. The things I’ve listed above are the practices and thought-processes that have helped me. They are in no way a sure-fire fix to the feelings of isolation, but they have helped me cope with living on a little rock in the middle of the ocean.

*Caleb is a second-year JET on a little island in Kagoshima Prefecture. Originally from Tennessee, he spends his time relaxing on the beach and watching the sunset. His criminally near empty blog can be found [here](#).*

Photos: Caleb Dunaway







# Weeknight Cooking, Meal Prep, the Tiny Fridge and You.

Clare Braganza (Fukushima)

Photo: Lisa Fotios

Modern life and the demands of work are hard enough without having to prepare three meals a day. Doing all the proper 'adulting' is even harder if you're a foreigner living in Japan, where the supermarket shelves are full of strange items and the average kitchen is smaller than its Western counterpart. Fortunately, some members of the international community have shared their go-to weeknight recipes and tips with us. And don't let that tiny fridge stop you from trying them out!

## Emma's Harissa Pasta

Emma Harding (Tokyo)

Photos: Emma Harding

Serves 2-4 (I like to cook a batch and take it into work for lunch)

### Ingredients\*

- 2 chicken breasts
- 2 tsp harissa paste—if you can't get hold of this, you can use 1 tsp of chilli powder, 1 tsp of paprika, a clove of garlic (I crush mine) and
- some salt and pepper
- 1 tub of cream
- 1 pack of cherry tomatoes
- 1 bag of spinach—the frozen stuff at 7/11 works fine!
- 1 pinch of chilli flakes (skip this if you don't like any spice)
- Some oil for cooking
- Your choice of pasta—we usually have it with penne or fusilli.
- Sour cream—if you go for the slightly spicy version, I enjoy a dollop of sour cream on top of mine.

### Method

- 1) Put your pasta in some boiling water with a little salt. This can cook while you're preparing the rest of the dish.
- 2) Chop your chicken into strips and your cherry tomatoes in half.
- 3) With a large frying pan on medium heat, fry the chicken in a pinch of chilli flakes, salt and pepper. If you don't like spice, leave the chilli flakes out.
- 4) Once the chicken is cooked, add all of the tomato halves and cook until soft (but they should maintain their shape).
- 5) Add two teaspoons of harissa paste (or the alternative spice mix) to the pan and stir, ensuring the tomatoes and chicken are well coated.
- 6) Add the spinach and cook until wilted.
- 7) Take off the heat, add the cream, stir to mix all of the delicious ingredients together and return to the stove. Allow the mixture to bubble away until thick and creamy.
- 8) Add the pasta to the chicken and tomato (a little pasta water will thicken it up) and some parmesan if you've got it. The amount of parmesan really depends on your tastes—I like mine super cheesy so tend to throw in a generous handful!
- 9) Serve (with cheese and/or sour cream if you like).





## Emma's Lazy 7/11 Pork

Emma Harding (Tokyo)

Photos: Emma Harding

Serves 2

### Ingredients

- 1 pack of the 7/11 "sweet pork" sauce
- 1/2 bag of sliced pork/200 g fresh pork—it's more convenient for me personally to buy the frozen bag of pork in 7/11, which works just as well as fresh sliced pork and covers four servings per bag, but use whichever you prefer. If you're using the frozen bag, half the bag will cover 2 servings.
- 1/2 bag of spinach (7/11 frozen stuff works fine)
- 1/2 bag of broccoli (7/11 frozen stuff works fine)
- Bowl of rice—I just use white rice and pop it in the rice cooker 20 minutes ahead of time.

### Method

- 1) Cook your broccoli in advance and wash the spinach (unless using frozen products, in which case skip this step).
- 2) Microwave (if frozen) the broccoli according to the instructions on the pack to ensure it is defrosted thoroughly.
- 3) Begin by cooking the pork all the way through on a medium heat—if you're using frozen, no oil is necessary here as the pork should contain enough moisture to prevent sticking to your pan. If you're using fresh pork, then I recommend a really tiny amount of oil just to prevent sticking, otherwise you'll end up with a very greasy dish!
- 4) Add the entire packet of sauce, the broccoli and the spinach to the pork. Mix together well and turn the heat down to low.
- 5) Once totally combined and all the ingredients are cooked through, serve with rice.

**Enjoy!** It's as simple as that and I really love how tasty this dish is. It's also very cheap—probably no more than 200-300 yen a serving.

*Emma is currently a second-year JET working at a senior high school in downtown Tokyo. When she isn't teaching, Emma enjoys blogging at [Emma-Loves.com](http://Emma-Loves.com), photography, eating food and playing Dragon Age and Final Fantasy XIV.*





## Overnight Oats: the perfect breakfast for busy mornings

Kayla Francis (Tokyo)

Photos: Kayla Francis

I hate waking up in the morning. I've found that I always end up rushing because I decided to take that '10 minute' lie-in which then ends up ruining the rest of my day. I end up starting my day flustered in the office chowing down on an onigiri that's doing nothing for me. Preparing a breakfast that is yummy and easy has been a complete game-changer for me. When I know I have a busy week coming up, overnight oats are my go-to. Cheap, versatile and filling, this recipe will be sure to start your day off well.



### Basic Overnight Oats

Makes 1 serving but multiply for meal-prep

#### Ingredients

- 🌿 Oats 75 g
- 🌿 Pinch of salt
- 🌿 Maple syrup 1 tsp (optional)
- 🌿 Chia seeds 1 tbsp (optional)
- 🌿 Milk of your choice (I use almond) 250 ml

#### Method

Mix all ingredients into your container of choice the night before and store in the fridge. Add a splash of milk so it's the right consistency for you and enjoy.

But wait! Plain oats can be pretty boring, read on for my favourite toppings.

### Carrot Cake Overnight Oats

#### Ingredients

- 🌿 Basic overnight oats mix (above)
- 🌿 Half a carrot grated
- 🌿 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 🌿 1 tsp allspice
- 🌿 2 tbsp raisins
- 🌿 Walnuts (I use 4) roughly chopped

#### Method

Mix all ingredients except for the walnuts into your container of choice. Store in the fridge overnight. Add a splash of milk and top with walnuts before serving. They will survive your commute if you wish to eat at work.

### Peanut Butter and 'Jelly' Overnight Oats

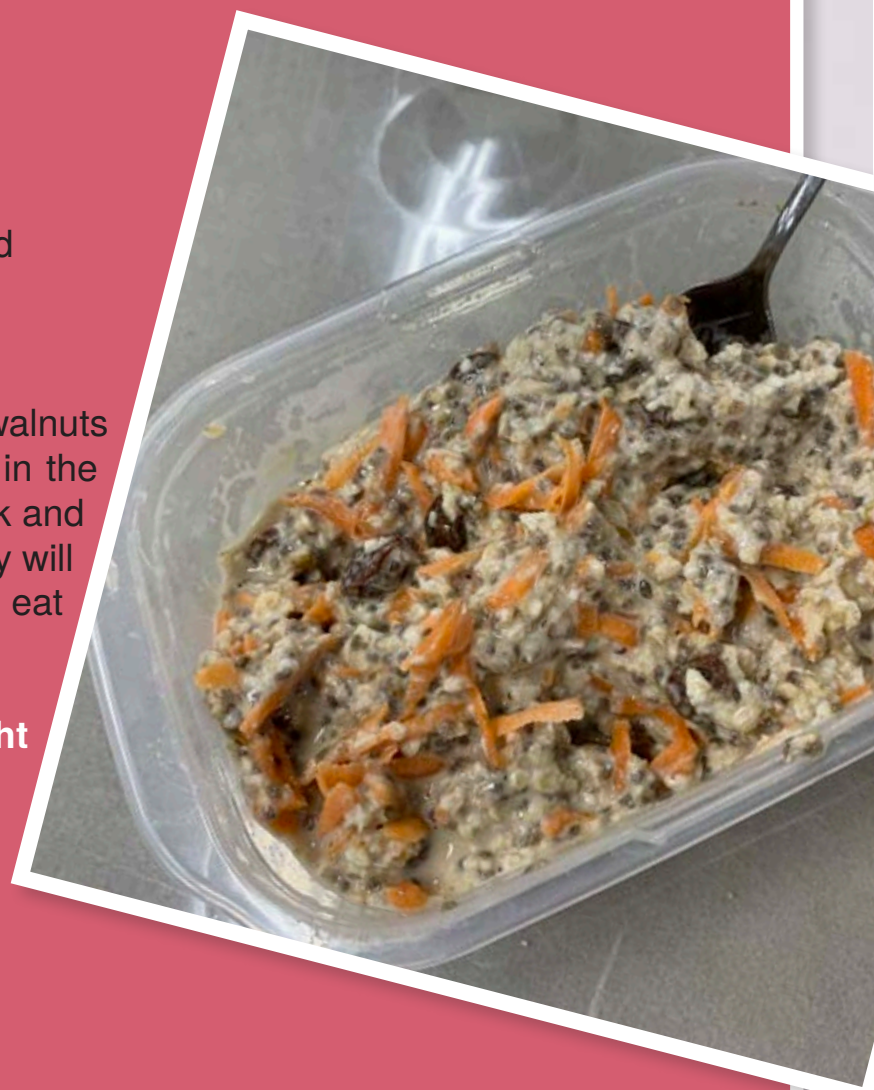
#### Ingredients

- 🌿 Basic overnight oats mix (above)
- 🌿 Peanut butter 1tbsp
- 🌿 Frozen mixed berries 50g
- 🌿 One banana mashed

#### Method

Mix all ingredients into a container of your choice and store in the fridge overnight before eating.

Don't be afraid to have fun with overnight oats. Not only can you experiment with whatever flavours you like but also textures by adding chia seeds, nuts and more/less milk and oats.





# Chicken and Kimchi Rice Bowls

Kayla Francis (Tokyo)

Photos: Kayla Francis

Living in Tokyo means that there are a lot of amazing restaurants to visit and I am ashamed to admit how much I eat out. When I do finally get round to cooking, I try to eat something with lots of vegetables in a foolish attempt to balance out my diet. This is the perfect mid-week meal prep for when you want something quick and filling but can't be bothered to cook. It's also incredibly versatile, and you can swap the meat and veg for anything you like. I like cooking with kimchi as it already has a lot of seasoning and therefore does all the hard work for me.

Serves 5

## Ingredients

- 🍃 Rice (I cook two cups)
- 🍃 500g of chicken cut into bite-size pieces
- 🍃 330g tub of kimchi
- 🍃 200g frozen Broccoli
- 🍃 200g frozen green beans
- 🍃 200g frozen spinach
- 🍃 2 carrots, grated
- 🍃 100g mushrooms, roughly chopped
- 🍃 5 eggs
- 🍃 Chilli flakes (optional)
- 🍃 Any veggies you have leftover in the fridge!

## Method

- 1) Wash and cook the rice according to your rice cooker/instructions on the pack. Boil your broccoli and green beans in salted water until tender (around five minutes). Drain and leave to the side.
- 2) In a separate pan heat oil over medium heat and fry the chicken until no longer pink.
- 3) Once the chicken is golden, add the mushrooms, grated carrots (I normally just grate them straight into the pan), spinach and any leftover veggies you might have (I added some leftover cabbage). Cook for roughly three minutes until the veg begins to soften.

72



- 4) Add the green beans, broccoli and a splash of soy sauce (I'm currently loving an oyster infused one). Add the kimchi and fold the ingredients together, be careful not to stir too much if you don't want the veggies to soften too much. Add chilli flakes.
- 5) Fry five eggs (my trick with eggs is always to cook over low heat). Separate the rice into four containers and a plate (I normally eat one portion now and save the rest for dinner/lunch). Divide the chicken and vegetable mix. Top with the fried eggs, add extra chilli flakes if you want (this recipe is also great with sriracha) and enjoy!

Kayla is a second year Tokyo JET from London, UK. When she's not working she can be found eating her way through Tokyo, trying out new classes, reading and cooking. She keeps track of all her cooking on Instagram: [@kayla64a](#) and has a [blog](#).

## The Trials of a Tiny Fridge

Got a tiny fridge? A freezer that's basically a shelf? Don't give up! Here's five tips to spare you a last-minute trip to the combini.

1. You may not realise this, but a lot of fruit and veg doesn't have to be stored in the fridge. According to the **Farmer's Almanac**, tomatoes, potatoes, garlic, peaches, apples, pears, bananas and many more should be left out of the fridge. (Although, pay close attention to your food if it reaches over 30 degrees in your kitchen.)
2. Divide up your portions (basically start meal prepping) as soon as you get home with your shopping. If you divide up your veg and meat from the beginning, it will take up less space.
3. Buy ingredients that will stretch over two or more recipes that week. For example, since I only cook for myself, I buy a bag of carrots and use it in both bolognese and curry.
4. Four is the magic number. Your cooked meals will still be safe and tasty for four days in the fridge, so you can spare your freezer space until then.
5. Embrace the tiny fridge life! You may have to food shop more often, but overall you'll probably buy less unnecessary things—you'll save money and reduce food waste! Say goodbye to forgotten fruit in the back of the fridge, or the yoghurt you didn't touch. Also, frozen meals aren't exactly the healthiest, so you'll be forced to eat fresher food.

Clare is a second-year JET in the inaka of Fukushima, but she's originally from England. When not editing **CONNECT's** Wellness section, she spends her days reading fantasy books, writing stories, and hiking up random mountains. You can follow her travels [here](#).

\*all measurements in this article are in metric

73



## Erasing Borders Through Online Yoga

Katie Ehrlich (Tokyo)

When the whole world went into emergency quarantine periods around March and April because of the coronavirus, just like many others I turned to my online community for support with maintaining my life as normal as possible. At that moment I wondered if it would be possible to see my old yoga instructor, Jenny Linares from Armonia Studio (Instagram: [@jennylinaresyoga](#) and [@armoniaestudio.pe](#)) from when I lived in Peru because she was the best teacher I ever had. I was so sad to lose her when I moved away. I am so grateful that from the grace of her huge heart she offered free online yoga lessons three times a week at a time I could attend, even with the time difference from across the world.

She provided me with a much-needed routine, a safe space to feel and deal with my emotions, and a way to keep active.

The reason why she resonates with me as a teacher since I began learning at her studio in 2019 is that she makes a clear mind and body connection. Her classes always begin with a mindfulness meditation where we focus on where we are emotionally and physically at that moment, followed by an opportunity to focus on a mental health goal we wish to achieve. She would always talk us

through her own mental struggles and the emotions she was going through at the time as well. It was so incredibly helpful to feel that common struggle together with her and my classmates.

Some of the words she has said to me that stand out the most were that we will always be put in uncomfortable situations, and we need to face and accept them; we need to find comfort even in discomfort. These words usually come to my mind when I am in those kinds of situations. She always showed that she cared deeply about us, and was even one of the first people to wish me a happy birthday since I took her yoga class first thing in the morning when I turned 30 stuck in my house. She was such a crucial component of my mental health during that time, and I am forever thankful to her.

Katie is a Tokyo Metropolitan public school JET from Colorado, USA. She is a language-learner, hiker, biker, Tokyo tiny kitchen chef, and artist.

## How People are Keeping Fit Through the Pandemic

Kayla Francis (Tokyo)

Photo: Katie Ehrlich

## Working Out From Home

With the coronavirus lurking worldwide, now has never been a better time to focus on our health. However, as gyms, classes and most physical activities being very difficult to socially distance within, it can be very challenging knowing what to do. That's why we at **CONNECT** have compiled a list of suggestions from people living across Japan on what has helped them stay fit at home.

Hopefully, this will help you too!





## YouTube workouts: Chloe Ting, Fitness Blender and Boho Beautiful

Elsie Tay (Hokkaido)

Living in Hokkaido means you'll be frost-bound for nearly half a year, and I quickly had to adapt to working out at home. One of the most important things to arm yourself with is definitely a good yoga mat. If you're on a budget, filling empty bottles with water also makes for a good alternative to weights.

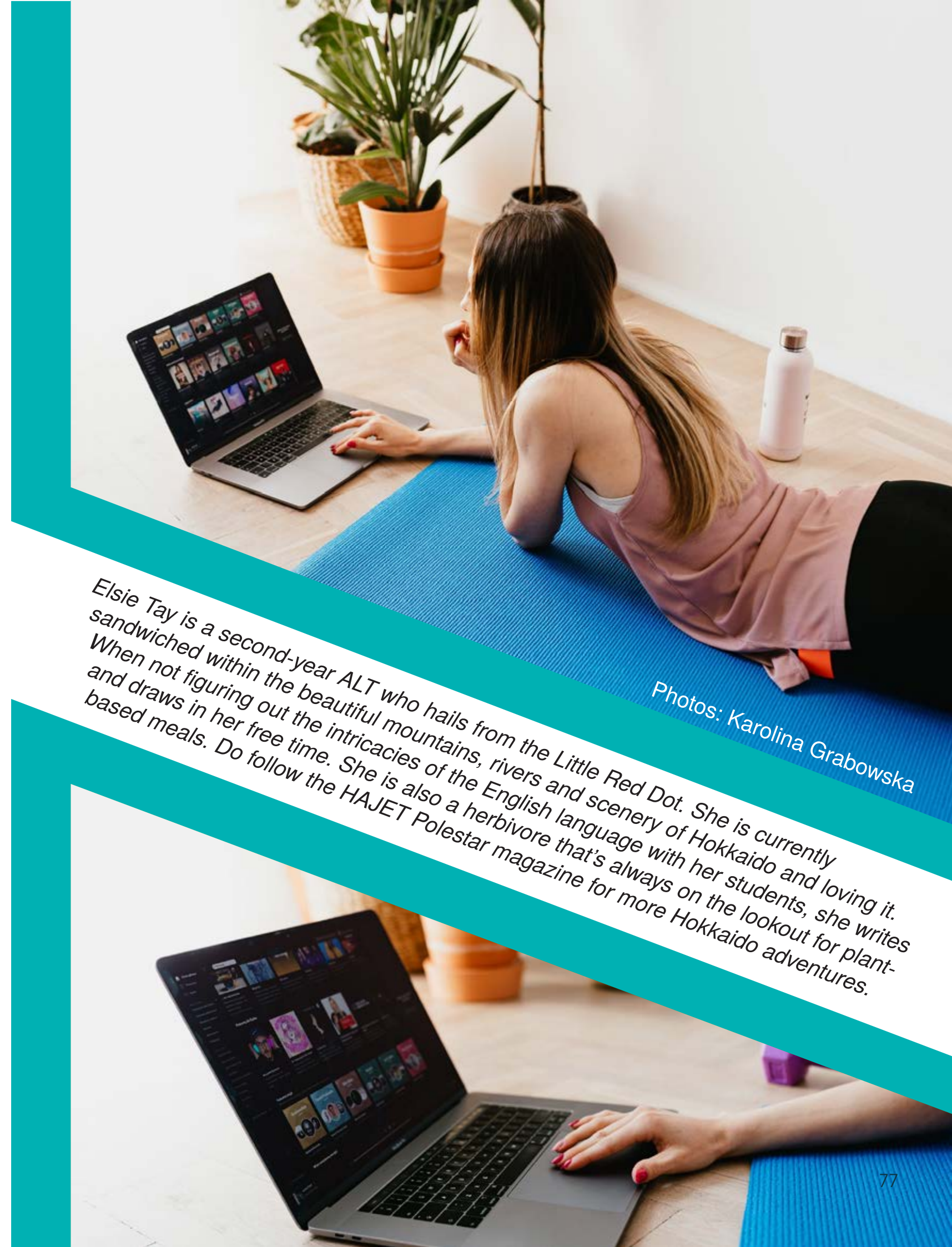
Being someone who gets distracted easily, I find that playing a YouTube fitness video is a good way to keep me focused on a workout. Some of my favourite channels are **Chloe Ting** and **Fitness Blender**, as they offer a wide variety of workouts that range from quick, beginner exercises to HIITs and even hour-long sessions. With such an extensive list, you'll be able to find something that suits your needs. If you live in a creaky, rickety building like me, or have past injuries, there are even low impact or no jumping workouts available on YouTube. Just take a quick search!

Don't forget about stretching exercises, as they can greatly help to improve your posture, relieve body aches and reduce the risk of injury. A yoga channel I recommend is **Boho Beautiful**. Their videos are wonderfully produced, with clear verbal instructions and demonstrations of yoga postures, and are often filmed against stunning natural backdrops. Other than yoga, you can also take your pick from their videos on pilates, meditation and even vegan recipes. With a strong focus on positivity, the calming and inspirational effect from doing their workouts can do wonders to your body and mind. They're perfect for kick-starting the day with or sweating out to after a long day of work.

Working out at home has its own perks too. It's cost-efficient, time-saving, and water is available anytime you need it.

The most important part of working out is to start on it and work on a consistent schedule to meet your goals.

As the tagline for Boho Beautiful says, "Your decisions today will define your tomorrow." Get working on it today!



Elsie Tay is a second-year ALT who hails from the Little Red Dot. She is currently sandwiched within the beautiful mountains, rivers and scenery of Hokkaido and loving it. When not figuring out the intricacies of the English language with her students, she writes and draws in her free time. She is also a herbivore that's always on the lookout for plant-based meals. Do follow the HAJET Polestar magazine for more Hokkaido adventures.

Photos: Karolina Grabowska





## Podcasts and Pilates: My Quarantine Routine

Samantha Harris (Tokushima)

The gym used to be my first stop after work, but that changed when I moved to Japan. I don't have any particular reason beyond being too lazy and cheap to go through the process of signing up for a gym in a foreign country. Ironically enough, that laziness prepared me to overcome the Netflix-and-futon temptations of the "Stay Home" era by forcing me to figure out how to keep up a fitness regime in a Japanese apartment.

I invested in a yoga mat and a few free weights (purchased at Hard-Off—check out their sports section for some decent discounted gear) and dove deep into the sea of free workout routines offered via YouTube. It's easy to get lost out there amidst the wanna-be influencers and sponsored swole bros. I've found two channels that I stick to: one for physical workouts, and one for mental wellbeing.

**Blogilates**—which, you may have guessed, is a pilates channel—has gotten me through three apartments all while improving my balance, flexibility, and strength with fun and easy to follow exercises. There's a great mix of beginner and advanced workouts on her channel. I'm a big fan of putting on a podcast and working through her monthly calendars.

**Yoga with Adriene** is more than just another yoga channel. The instructor is funny, down to earth, and, as corny as it sounds, genuinely feels like a friend. If you've wanted to give yoga a shot but are worried about it being too "woo-woo" or forcing you into a pretzel shape, seriously check out her channel.

Keeping up my workout routine has definitely kept me energetic, healthy, and sane.

One word of warning, though: if your workout space has shoji screens, be extra careful during your downward-facing dogs.

*Samantha Harris hails from the tiny mountain town of Boone, North Carolina in the United States. She has been living and working as a highschool ALT in Ishii, Tokushima since 2018. When not teaching, she is either writing, wandering around her beautiful inaka prefecture, or playing Animal Crossing.*



## How one semi-inaka JET stays active

Madeline Yochum (Kyoto)

My go-to hobby for the greater part of this past year has been fitness. Although I prefer a gym membership, I decided to opt-out of joining a nearby club and created my at-home fitness routine. Although living in a one-room studio has its challenges, I've been able to create a workable space.

I practice yoga regularly, but high-intensity workouts and interval training videos are what helps me stay motivated. Some of my favorite certified trainers with free videos on YouTube are Millionaire Hoy, Fitness Blender, and Laruga Yoga.

**Millionaire Hoy** has a variety of high intensity, interval training videos that are great for those who've been working out for a while, as well as beginners. He works out with you in real-time and provides easier modifications on screen. I dare you to complete his 1000-calorie burn challenge without breaks.

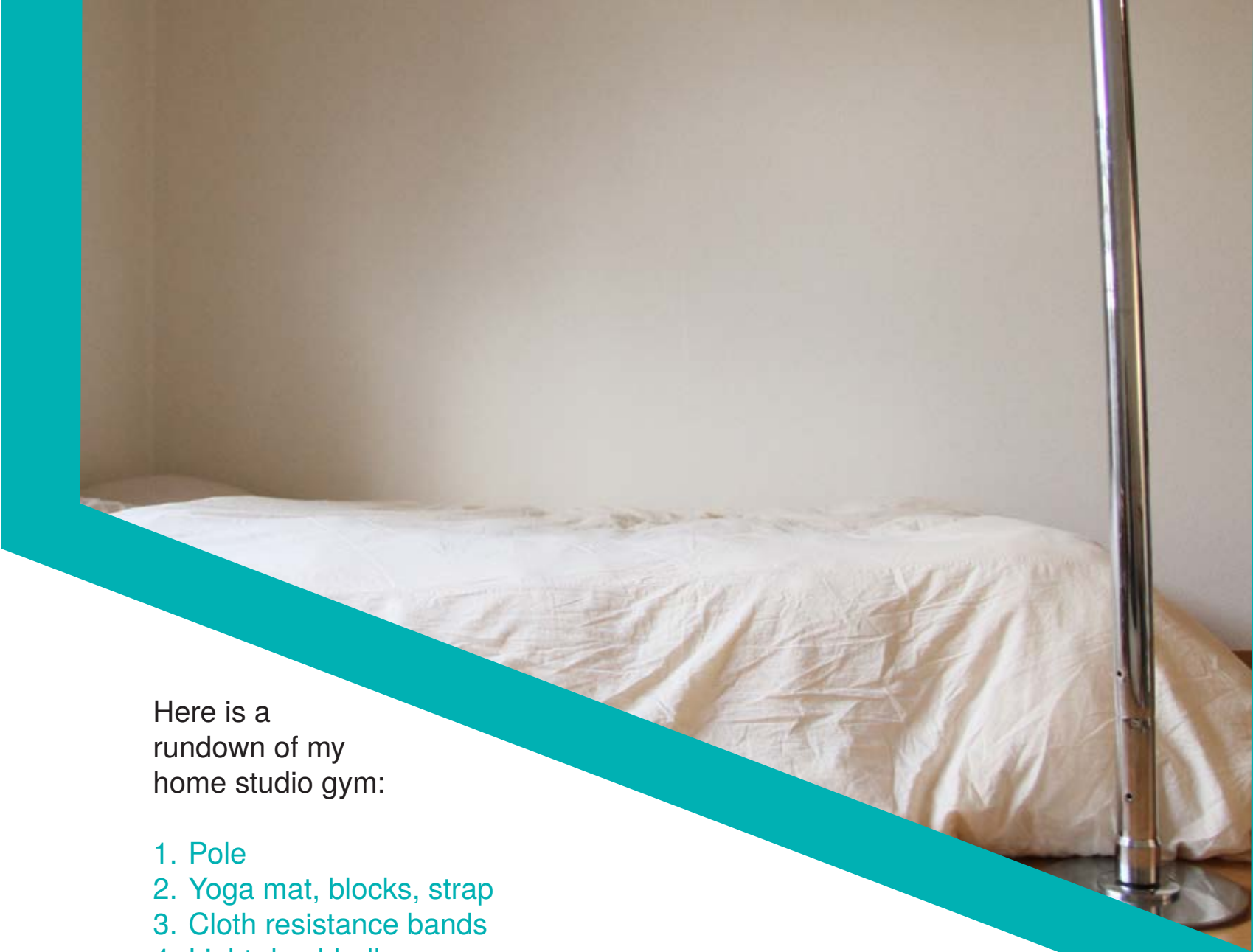
**The Fitness Blender** channel is a married duo of certified personal trainers that publish interval training videos with a soft voice over. I like their videos because they're calm and simple, but motivating.

**Laruga Yoga** is an ashtanga yoga instructor that has free full videos of the ashtanga half primary series, full series, along with tutorials on pose variations.

I like these three online trainers because they are all certified within their genre of fitness and have years of experience. Their taglines are not gimmicky and they keep me motivated in different ways to stay active.

Additionally, I am into pole dancing. I was heartbroken when I had to leave my pole in America, but I was able to order one of similar quality online and install it safely in my studio.

Because I lack space, I rarely do spinning tricks on the pole, but I practice my static climbs, along with doing some flexibility training and other strength-training exercises.



Here is a  
rundown of my  
home studio gym:

1. Pole
2. Yoga mat, blocks, strap
3. Cloth resistance bands
4. Light dumbbells

*Before joining the Kyoto prefecture as a high school AET, Madeline worked as a barista and bartender. You can typically spot her taking long bike rides and buying conbini drinks in Kameoka.*

Photo: Madeline Yochum (Kyoto)





# APPS THAT GET YOU MOVING

FINDING MOTIVATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Kayla Francis (Tokyo)

Photos: Michelle Amoroso,  
Clare Braganza, Kevin Feeley

It's no secret that we spend a lot of time on our phones, but isn't it about time that we put that to good use? With new technology coming out regularly and helping our every need, it's no surprise that there are a lot of fitness apps out there. It can be very difficult to know which ones to go for. That's why we've asked people around Japan what works for them, so you don't have to.

## POKÉMON GO

Michelle Amoroso (Tokyo)

I started playing Pokémon GO when it first came out, for fun. After a while, I realised I was doing a lot more walking around than I usually would and thought, "Great! An exercise app I can stick with!" The game tracks your steps and offers rewards when you move around, such as hatching Pokémon eggs; it also allows you to send virtual gifts, see what your friends are doing, and battle other trainers, as well as interact with a virtual pet. Another key

feature for me was a challenge mode to do raids (battle at particular locations or PokéGyms). During the pandemic, these features were especially important to me for keeping connected to other people.

I would wait until fewer people were on the street, then visit local parks; I walked to multiple locations in nearby parks with Pokémon gyms, and the steps added up. While walking, I could open my 'gifts' and enjoy a little surprise and cheer up at the sight of my ridiculously cute and cheerful Pokémon 'pet' pretending to walk along with me. When I got to the park, I would complete the challenge, then spend some time afterwards doing stretches and other exercises. Frequently, there would be other people also playing Pokémon GO, along with people just visiting the park to exercise. We would be a safe distance away physically, but could nod and smile at each other.

I also would chat with other Pokémon GO players online via other apps, but on the topic of Pokémon GO, where we could discuss our progress with the challenges, relay news and hints, and ask for gifts and trades. Exchanging gifts and trading Pokémon was especially needed during the pandemic, so the people who were able to go out to

parks or had PokéStops close to their homes could help out other players who were far from PokéStops or living in areas under lockdown. Players would also use this opportunity to check up on each other in general and share memes.

Pikachu, I thank you—  
for helping me keep fit!

*Michelle is an ALT in West Tokyo, originally from Trinidad and Tobago, an island nation in the Southern Caribbean. She enjoys playing Pokémon in all forms, indoor climbing and archery, and her academic career is in science.*





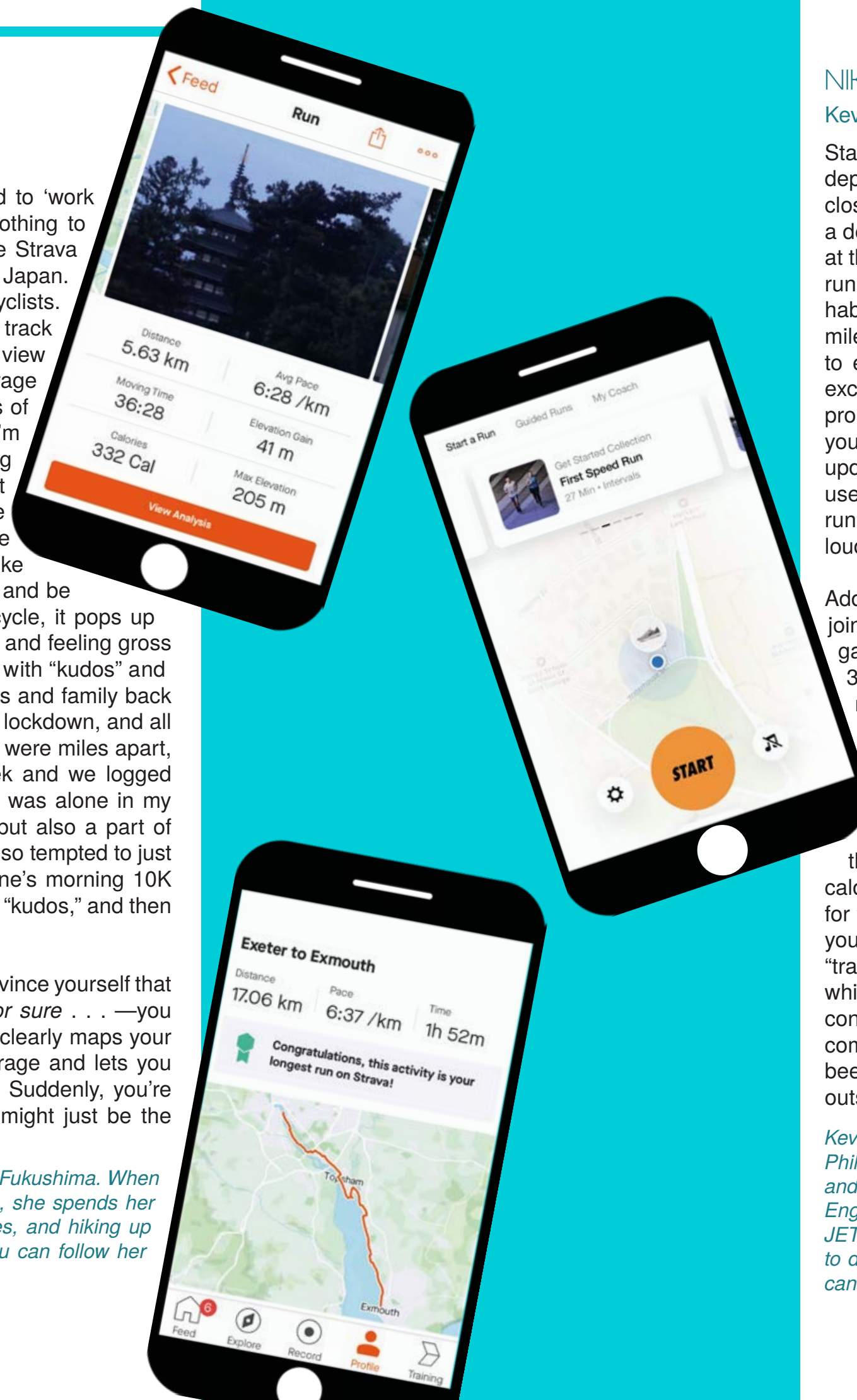
## STRAVA—KEEPING FIT WITH OLD FRIENDS

Clare Braganza (Fukushima)

When my schools shut and I was told to ‘work from home’ for a few months—with nothing to do—I found myself re-downloading the Strava app. I hadn’t used it since moving to Japan. Strava is an app for runners and cyclists. You can log your sessions and keep track of your progress via satellite maps, view statistics about inclines and your average pace per km, and even get an analysis of your performance if you start paying (I’m quite happy with the free parts). Seeing your weekly average kilometres shoot up is very gratifying, but what kept me running every other day during those long months was the social aspect. Like Instagram, you can follow your friends and be followed back. When you post a run/cycle, it pops up on their feed. Whilst I’m guzzling water and feeling gross after a difficult run, my phone lights up with “kudos” and encouraging comments from my friends and family back home. Everyone in the U.K. was under lockdown, and all my old friends had taken to Strava. We were miles apart, but as more friends joined every week and we logged our runs, I felt a buzz of excitement. I was alone in my apartment in the middle of the *inaka* but also a part of something bigger. On days when I was so tempted to just skip my run and watch Netflix, someone’s morning 10K would pop up on my feed. I’d give them “kudos,” and then reach for my trainers.

If you’re like me and can very easily convince yourself that you’ll go running tomorrow instead—for sure . . . —you may need a running app like Strava. It clearly maps your running routes, pace, and weekly average and lets you share your achievements with friends. Suddenly, you’re not running alone anymore, and that might just be the motivation you need.

*Clare is a second-year JET in the inaka of Fukushima. When not editing **CONNECT**’s Wellness section, she spends her days reading fantasy books, writing stories, and hiking up random mountains in northern Japan. You can follow her travels [here](#).*



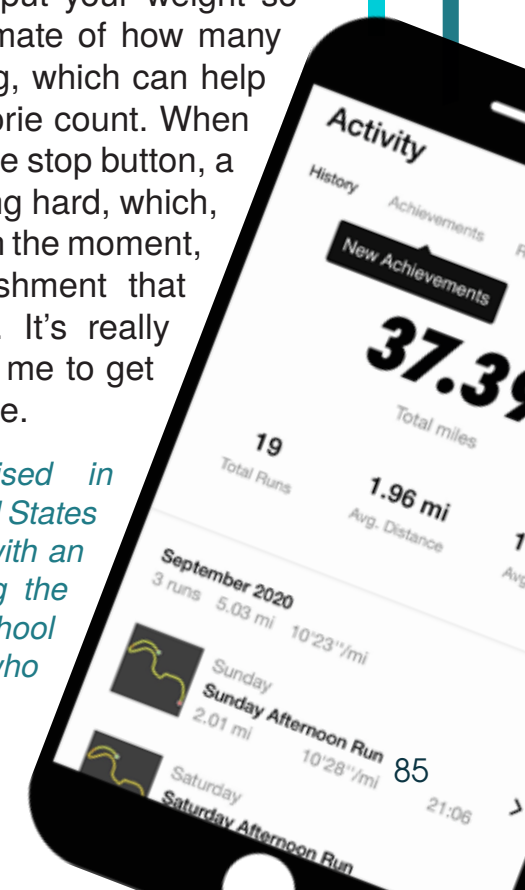
## NIKE RUN CLUB

Kevin Feeley (Gunma)

Staying in shape during COVID can be tough as, depending on where you are, the local gyms may be closed or at limited occupancy. While normally this may be a detriment, being forced to be creative with my workouts at this time has gotten me back into my old workout habit: running. I’ve had difficulty in the past maintaining this habit because it can be difficult to track the number of miles I’ve completed if I’m not near a track, and I tend to exaggerate how much I’ve actually done, leading to excessive days off. The Nike Run Club app solves these problems for me as it uses GPS tracking—through either your phone or a smartwatch—to keep track of your miles, updating you every half-mile with the time. I’ve personally used the app on my phone and carried it with me while running, and, even without headphones, the speaker is loud enough to update me throughout the workout.

Additionally, there are monthly “challenges” that you can join to help keep you on track. As I’ve been out of the game a while, I started with the easiest challenge of 31 miles in one month or roughly one to two miles per run depending on your frequency. It also has the nifty feature of allowing you to input what shoes you wear while running, so you can keep track of how many miles you’ve put on them and, for more advanced runners, which shoes you run faster in. The app also gives you the option to input your weight so that it can give you a rough estimate of how many calories you’ve burned while running, which can help for those looking to hit a certain calorie count. When you are finished for the day and hit the stop button, a “trainer” will commend you for working hard, which, while corny, actually does feel good in the moment, confirming the sense of accomplishment that comes with completing a workout. It’s really been a blessing for me and pushed me to get outside more and get back into shape.

*Kevin Feeley was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States and graduated from Amherst College with an English degree in 2019 before joining the JET Program. He wants to go to law school to do public defence work for people who cannot afford an attorney.*





# COMMUNITY AND TRAVEL

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*"If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about about people"*

— Virginia Woolf

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*"Experience is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens to you."* — Aldous Huxley

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# The Journey

## Not the Destination

*Japan's Wonderful Train Stations*

Clarissa Combe (Aomori)

Japan is the land of trains. From the bullet train to your local *futsu-densha*, there's something relaxing about trundling through the Japanese countryside, rice paddies flying past the wide windows. I often find that half the fun of travelling around Japan are those idle hours where my brain switches off to enjoy the scenery. However, it's not just the trains; Japan's myriad of bizarre and unique train stations also adds some excitement to getting from point A to point B.

### Aomori's Jomon Overlord

While it's more customary to approach a train station on a train, Kizukuri Station in Tsugaru City, Aomori Prefecture, is far more impressive if you drive. The first time I visited the station was on a work trip around various Jomon era archaeological sites in the area, and I did not expect my first encounter with the Jomon to be a giant statue of *Shako-chan* suddenly peering down at me from above when we drove around the corner. Shako-chan is the name locals give to the Jomon *shakoki-dogu*, or goggle-eyed clay figurine, that was discovered in a nearby rice field by accident in 1887. One day, a farmer saw something poking out of the ground, and when he tugged on it, out popped Shako-chan. Discovering Jomon artefacts is a surprisingly common affair in Tsugaru City, which is home to the Kamegaoka Site, where hundreds upon thousands of *dogu* and pieces of pottery have been excavated since the Edo period. However, Shako-chan is not like other *dogu* and has become an icon of the area.



*Animal Crossing* fans may have seen Shako-chan on Redd's ship before because the 'ancient statue' is also a shakoki-dogu. However, the Shako-chan titan that graces Kizukuri Station is closer to the forgery than the original as her eyes also light up eerily when a train approaches the station. The first time I went to the station, I was lucky enough to witness the *irasshai* beam in action as Shako-chan's narrow eyes lit up in seven different colours, like an ancient piece of alien technology suddenly awakening. I was half-expecting laser beams to start locking onto me, like when I stumble across

a hidden Guardian in *Legend of Zelda*. As I've yet to see another station in Japan that boasts a giant Jomon statue, I have to say Kizukuri Station is worth a stop on your journey.

*Clarissa is a 3rd year CIR who left the London life behind to frolic in the mountains of Aomori. When she's not lying on her sofa reading, she's busy horse riding or digging into her third taco rice of the week.*



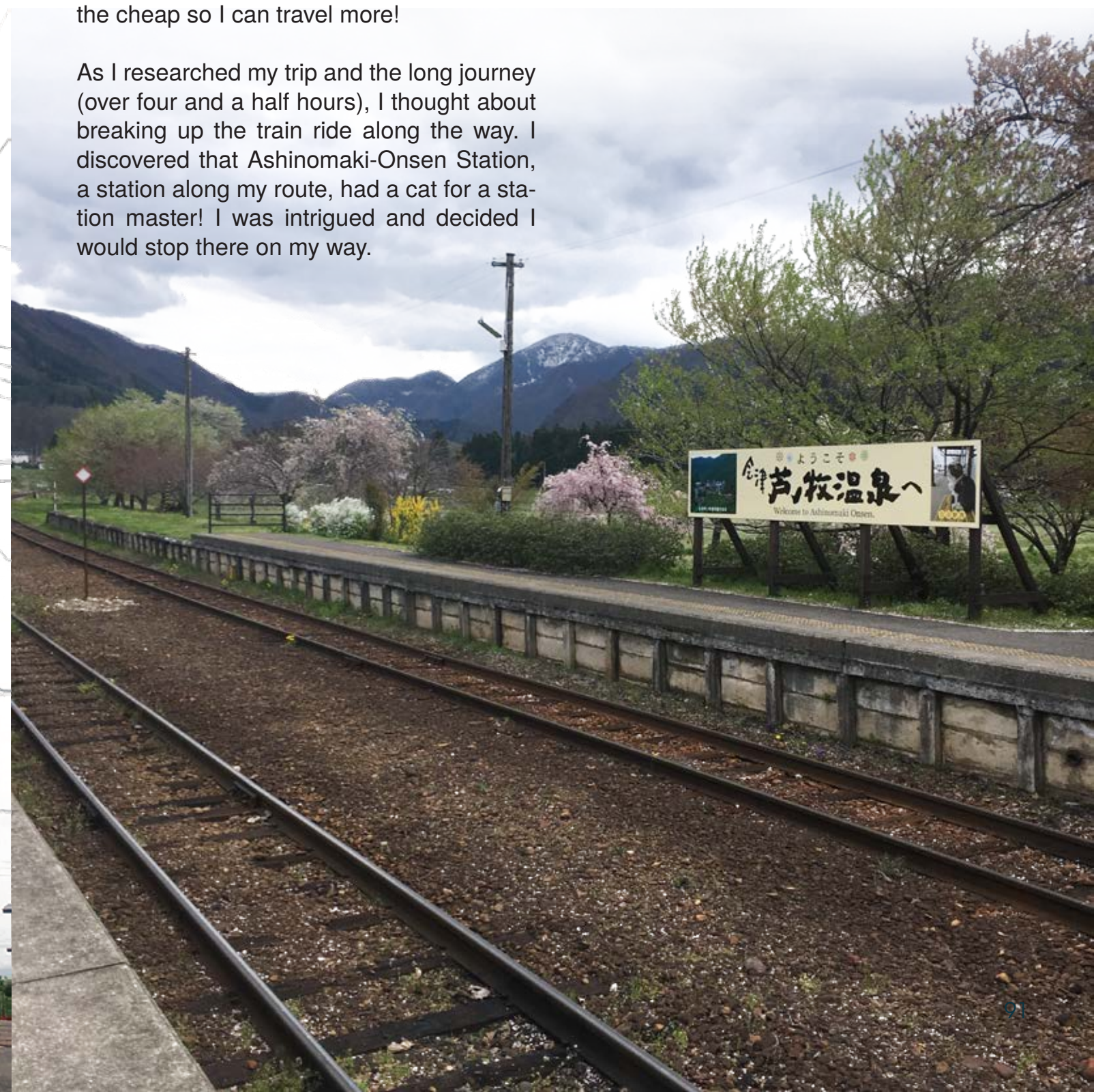
## Kitty Station Master

*Kirsty Broderick (Saitama)*

The extended Golden Week of 2019 had arrived, and I was off to Fukushima for a few days! I had purchased a Yuttari (relaxing) Aizu Tobu Free Pass, which allowed me to travel from my home in Saitama to Aizuwakamatsu in Fukushima on Tobu trains at a much cheaper rate than the shinkansen. The trip would be slower but considerably more budget-friendly, and I like to travel on the cheap so I can travel more!

As I researched my trip and the long journey (over four and a half hours), I thought about breaking up the train ride along the way. I discovered that Ashinomaki-Onsen Station, a station along my route, had a cat for a station master! I was intrigued and decided I would stop there on my way.

The original cat station master was Tama, who became station master of Kishi Station in Wakayama. Tama put the station on travel maps and saved the rural Kishigawa Railway Line, which was under threat of closure due to low ridership and financial difficulties. Tama was originally a stray that stayed around the station and was cared for intermittently by different people in the community. In January 2007, Mitsunobu Kojima, president of the Wakayama Electric Railway, officially declared Tama as the station master of Kishi Station.







Following Kishi Station's success, in April 2008, Ashinomaki-Onsen Station appointed their first cat station master named Bus. Bus was a stray who had lived around the station since 2000. Bus was named for the Catbus in My Neighbour Totoro and became an icon for the town. When she passed away in 2016, the whole town turned out for her funeral. A peach blossom tree was planted by the station in her memory, and people still leave flowers and small offerings to her. The waiting room area where Bus liked to spend most of her time is also kept as a form of memorial to her. Out of respect, no food, drinks, or pictures are allowed in here.

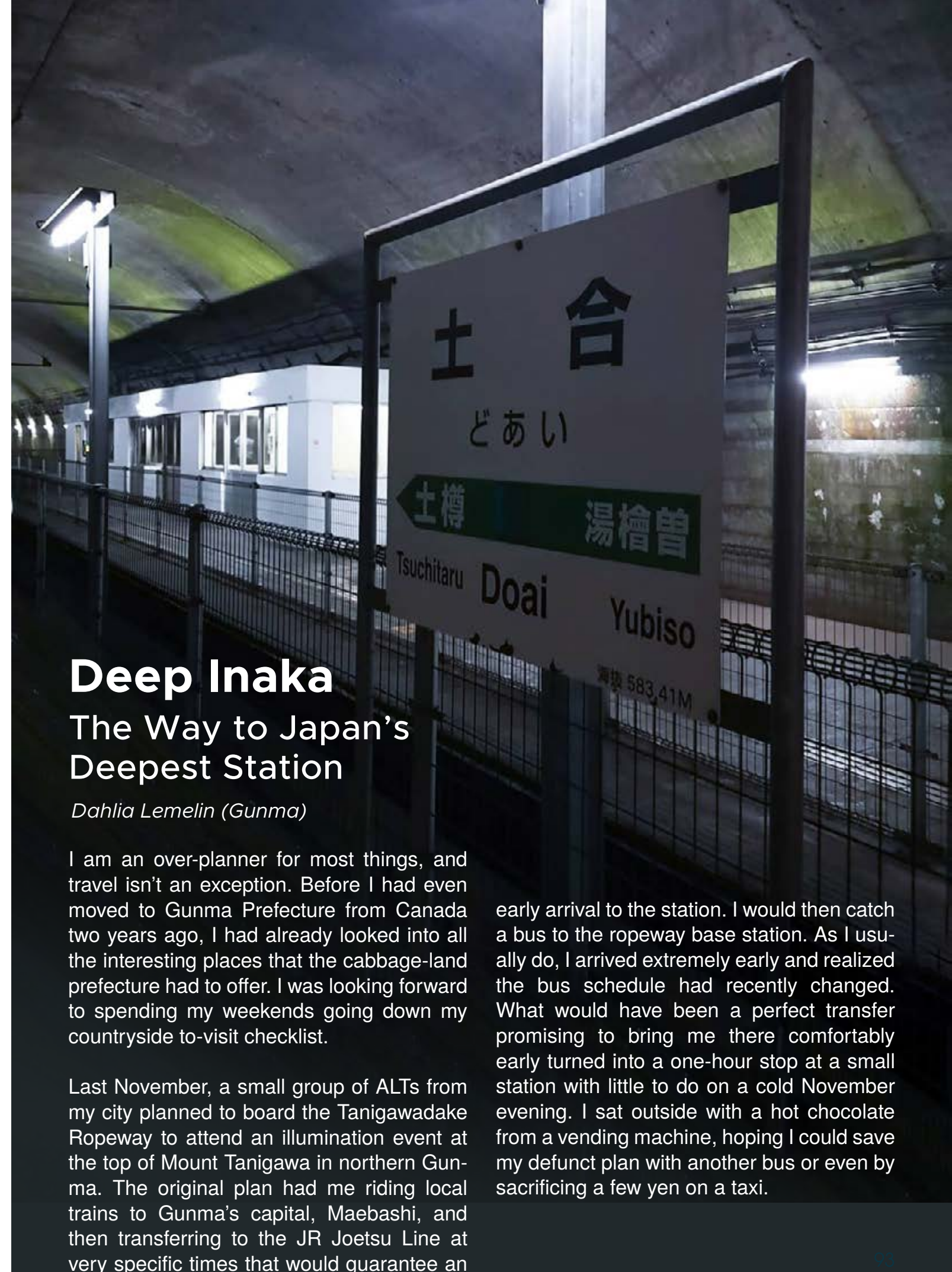
Bus was succeeded as station master by a cat named Love. The station has become a popular date spot for couples in the area due to the new station master's name. The station has created an 'insta-bae' photo spot to further encourage this.

Another cat named Peach has since joined Love. Both cats are adorable and well-loved. The station staff keeps a close eye on them to make sure they are not overwhelmed by the visitors, and they have resting areas in the office where the cats can retreat and have some privacy. Unfortunately, when I visited, the cats were resting, and I could not pat or photograph them. I was glad their wellbeing is looked after though, especially considering animal rights are often neglected.

Several other stations now have animal station masters too, including some dog station masters! I encourage anyone to seek out these stations and visit our animal station masters. The stations that employ animal station masters are typically very quiet, in rural towns, and can be quite fun to visit.



*Kirsty Broderick is a fourth-year ALT. She originally comes from New Zealand and now calls Saitama home. She can usually be found daydreaming about her next adventure—at least corona can't steal dreams . . . only plans!*



## Deep Inaka The Way to Japan's Deepest Station

*Dahlia Lemelin (Gunma)*

I am an over-planner for most things, and travel isn't an exception. Before I had even moved to Gunma Prefecture from Canada two years ago, I had already looked into all the interesting places that the cabbage-land prefecture had to offer. I was looking forward to spending my weekends going down my countryside to-visit checklist.

Last November, a small group of ALTs from my city planned to board the Tanigawadake Ropeway to attend an illumination event at the top of Mount Tanigawa in northern Gunma. The original plan had me riding local trains to Gunma's capital, Maebashi, and then transferring to the JR Joetsu Line at very specific times that would guarantee an

early arrival to the station. I would then catch a bus to the ropeway base station. As I usually do, I arrived extremely early and realized the bus schedule had recently changed. What would have been a perfect transfer promising to bring me there comfortably early turned into a one-hour stop at a small station with little to do on a cold November evening. I sat outside with a hot chocolate from a vending machine, hoping I could save my defunct plan with another bus or even by sacrificing a few yen on a taxi.





Surprisingly, my transport navigation application was offering me a new route; not with the bus this time, but rather, a new available route on the same line I had just arrived on—the Joetsu Line. Calculating travel time and carefully looking at the details of the route to make sure I could get to my destination safely in such an unfamiliar area, I saw the name of the recommended final station, and, surprisingly, it rang some bells. Doai Station (土合駅).

Sitting on the train with about a dozen people, I headed north to my destination: the last station of the Joetsu Line in Gunma Prefecture before it enters Niigata. I saw the dense

forest of the *inaka* grow darker as the sun set behind the mountain range. The train then made a turn and entered a 13 km long tunnel under the mountains, the Shin-Shimizu Tunnel. And this is where it led me: to the middle of the dark tunnel at the north-bound platform of Doai Station, 70 m (230 ft) underground. Welcome to the deepest station in Japan.

A handful of people disembarked and looked around in awe, phone cameras out to snap shots of the train leaving us behind in the dimly-lit, humid tunnel, where an old sign

drips with rust and the nostalgia of a previously useful station. For years, the unstaffed station hasn't been too popular, with about 20 passengers daily. The opening of the Joetsu Shinkansen pushed it towards its demise as a commuter station, transforming it into a post-apocalyptic style abandoned tourist destination for train enthusiasts everywhere. After a few pictures, I quickly realized I had to go out to meet my friends.

That's where the real challenge started. Even though the platform heading towards central-south Gunma is on the ground level and surrounded by mountainous nature, this underground platform doesn't have easy access to the exit. It lies at the bottom of a 486 step stairway, with no escalator or elevator. Only your legs can carry you out. The unstaffed ticket gate is at ground level, which takes about 10 minutes to reach by foot, or maybe 15 for unfit people like myself. Nothing has seen sunlight since the station's opening about 90 years ago; the humid grey walls are lined with metal pipes and screws,

rust claiming most of the exposed parts. With hikers quickly going up and leaving me behind with only myself, my heavy breath and the flowy sound of underground water dripping created an atmosphere that was undeniably creepy and cool.

For train enthusiasts, hikers, or even travel nerds, I recommend the detour, even if only for a few *instagrammable* shots. The Minakami area is famous for its ski resorts in the winter, and Mount Tanigawa is a popular hiking location, so if you ever find yourself in northern Gunma, ride the Joetsu Line to find Doai Station! The more courageous and physically fit should arrive through the tunnel to climb the stairs and meet the more casual travellers who stopped at ground level—all marvelling at the mysterious, long stairway to the deep inaka.



*Dahlia Lemelin is a French-Canadian JET living in the southern part of Gunma Prefecture. Interested in alternative Japanese fashion and music from a young age, she decided to move to Japan to share her creative hobbies with local communities and friends as well as take part in domestic events with people like her. She hopes to share the curious and mysterious, quirky side of Japan to outsiders in an approachable and fun way to destroy stereotypes of "weird Japan".*



Regan McAllister  
(Aomori)



# CYCLING TO CAPE SOYA

# BIKE-PACKING HOKKAIDO

Sitting in my town office on the first day of summer vacation, I realized it was the day I had planned to travel to Tokyo for the Olympics. After seven months of suppression, my adventure bug no longer wished to lie dormant. However, living in a pandemic, I recognized the necessity of abiding by social distancing guidelines. This is how my plan for biking to the northernmost point of Japan came to fruition.

“Is it okay if I visit Hokkaido next week? I am going to travel by 自転車 (*jitensha*) and camp the entire time,” I asked my supervisor.

“You mean 電車 (*densha*)? Sounds a bit risky,” he responded, assuming I mispronounced the word for train.

“No, no, 自転車,” I said, stressing the *ji*. Others in the office looked up, and once more, I was corrected,

“電車? Train?”

“No, with my チャリ (*chari*), I want to bike to Wakkanai.” I used the slang word for bicycle as I acted out riding a bike. A moment of silence passed as my office looked at me quizzically, during which I explained my intent to bike-pack Hokkaido.

Cape Soya  
Hokkaido's northernmost point



I planned to complete my 10-day trip without the use of public transportation (besides a couple of ferries—I’m a good swimmer, but not that good) or hotels. I arrived at the port of Tomakomai around 6 a.m., and as I rolled onto Hokkaido, with no concrete plan aside from the goal of reaching Cape Soya, I had one thought on my mind: I had ten days—how hard could it be?



My first day gave me quite the cycle for my money. I first headed east to Noboribestu to visit Jigokudani, or Hell Valley. Having never bike-packed before, I took my time getting acquainted with my loaded bicycle. After a quick foot dip in the famous Oyunuma River natural footbath, I felt eager and energized and decided to continue to Lake Toya for the night. I took the most direct route to get to the lake, which cut through the mountains.

## Rookie mistake #1:

overestimating my ability, or, as I prefer to say, underestimating the difficulty of the terrain.

I started ascending the road, going slow but steady. 15 minutes turned into 30, then an hour, and the incline kept growing steeper and the road windier. My legs soon turned to jelly, I conceded defeat, dismounted my bicycle, and committed to walking up the rest of the mountain, which at this point felt vertical. Soon, my weak arms were also on fire, and I largely contemplated turning around, but my stubborn self wanted to retain some degree of pride. Luckily, cars on this route were thin, limiting the number of people who witnessed this pitiful sight.

Finally, after what felt like summing Everest, I reached the top. I walked over hoping for a nice view, but as I approached the look-out, a downpour began. Not just a shower, but the type of run-to-cover rainstorm with ferocious raindrops that sting when they hit you. I quickly strapped on my poncho and thought 'at least it's downhill from here.'



## Rookie mistake #2:

not having adequate, or really any, rain gear.



*Rishiri Island*

What I didn't think through was the physics of wearing a poncho while racing down a windy, slippery hill. Between the rain washing sweat into my eyes and obscuring my vision, my poncho turning into a parachute, my feet slipping and the pedals whacking into my shins (**rookie mistake #3; not having clip-in pedals**), and puddles spraying dirty road water up into my face, this was definitely not the idea of fun that I had envisioned. Nevertheless, I made it to the lake. Never

have I appreciated the warmth of an onsen so much in my life. The rain let up briefly for me to pitch my tent and promptly fall asleep. The nice thing about exhaustion is that you don't have the mental energy to worry, or even think about, the future and how many more miserable, mountainous rain encounters lie ahead. I was just happy to have survived day one.







*Hokkaido Rice Fields*

The following days were much more enjoyable, albeit still filled with some unfortunate weather. In six days, I cycled up to the northern town of Wakkanai, averaging about 150 km a day, often waking up before the sunrise in an attempt to beat the rain. Spoiler alert: mother nature won every time. From Lake Toya, I passed through Lake Shikotsu and Chitose, then spent a day soaking in the beautiful lavender-smelling flower fields of Furano and admiring the pristine blue

lake of Biei. From there, it was a fairly straight shot north through endless fields of rice and corn. I was warned by many that this section of Hokkaido is ‘boring.’ Though the terrain and landscape aren’t the most diverse, I find rice paddies to be one of the prettiest parts of the Japanese countryside. I also feel slightly indebted to the rice fields due to the sheer amount of rice I consume daily, so it feels unfair to belittle them.

On my fifth day, I was enthusiastically greeted by rain again in Otoineppu. Accepting that it wouldn’t let up in the foreseeable future, I set to work pitching my tent next to the one other soul braving the weather. A kind man emerged to assist me and pointed out a small splinter in my tent pole. It hadn’t caused me any trouble thus far, so I ignored it and took refuge from the rain.

## Rookie mistake #4: not carrying duct tape, which fixes everything.

At about midnight, the wind picked up, and I awoke to my tent feeling like the big bad wolf was outside huffing and puffing, and then yes, blowing my tent down. A huge gust caused the splintered pole to snap, and my tent began flooding with water. Luckily, an awning that offered about half a meter of rain coverage stood not too far away. I hadn’t sprinted that hard since high school basketball drills.

My misery was quickly overshadowed by victory when I reached Wakkanai the following day. My final destination of Cape Soya was still 30 km further, but I decided to first detour to Rishiri and Rebun islands. Rishiri Island boasts a volcano, lovingly referred to as Rishiri Fuji, which is the icon of the popular Shiroi Koibito cookies. The volcano steals the spotlight and is even prettier up close; however,



*Rebun Island*



it was Rebun's unanticipated rugged beauty that stole my heart. With the best weather of my trip, a stunning view of Mt. Rishiri, dramatic cliffs that felt like the Scottish Highlands and bright green vegetation everywhere, Rebun is a nature lover's dream. As I settled into my campsite that evening, I remembered the meteor shower set to occur that night. With minimal light pollution, the sky looked like a planetarium. For the next hour I lay with my head poked out of my tent, marveling at the brightest shooting stars I have ever seen, surrounded by the sound of laughing families and the smell of sizzling barbeque meat, feeling the good sensation of tired muscles from a day of use. It was in this moment that all the hours of wet, windy cycling and tent mishaps became worth it.

Upon returning to Wakkanai, I battled the gnarly winds that frequently plague the coast, snailing my way up to Cape Soya. I didn't have big expectations for what reaching the "finish line" would feel like, but this probably ranks as the most anticlimactic finish to anything I've ever completed. I took a picture, spent a few minutes hoping to catch a glimpse of Russia (she was being quite shy), and then got back on my bike and started pedaling my way back down south.

Hokkaido was a challenge, both physically and mentally, but it was also without a doubt one of the best travel adventures I've had. It wasn't the arrival at the northernmost point of Cape Soya that left me feeling triumphant, but the simple moments throughout the journey that evoked the most joy; the sun peeking out after a storm, a thumbs up from a motorcyclist or “頑張つて” from a driver as I crawled up a steep hill, a soak in an onsen after a day of riding, the man who helped me pitch my tent in a downpour, stumbling upon a sunflower field in the rain, or my shoes finally drying after being wet for 2 days straight. Bike-packing Hokkaido allowed me to be present, without regular daily distractions, and develop a deep appreciation for the stunning beauty and kindhearted people of Hokkaido, Rishiri, and Rebun islands. It was a welcome reminder that slowing down can be a powerful tool to connect with yourself and cultivate gratitude for the small things that we often overlook in our busy and stressful lives.



Rebun Island

*Regan McAllister is a 2nd year ALT in Rokunohe, Aomori. Having spent 7 years of her childhood living in Tokyo, she is enjoying the opportunity to experience a new region of Japan as a working adult. A nature enthusiast, she spends her free time running, hiking, cycling, skiing and partaking in just about any other outdoor activity. She also enjoys eating copious amounts of ramen, reading about the world and planning for her next travel adventure.*



103

Cape Soya



# Cultural Exchange Through Holiday Cheer



**Nicholle Applewhite (Yamaguchi)**

**M**y name is Nicholle and I'm from Atlanta, Georgia by way of Grand Rapids, Michigan. I came to Japan on a whim from living in Thailand. Currently I am running an English immersion babysitting service and English conversation bar at SourApple Patch in Gentengai, near UbeShinkawa in Ube. When I'm not at work, I host parties and gatherings based on various American holidays to promote cultural exchange.

## A Feast From the Heart

**O**ne of the events I hold is a Thanksgiving dinner. Initially, there was a previous JET who used to hold a small dinner for her friends. When she left, one of the attendees that enjoyed the event wanted it to continue. He asked me if I could do so and I agreed, but chose to open the event to anyone who was interested in living in the area instead of making it a small "only friends" gathering.

I cook a traditional southern Thanksgiving dinner with members of my "village" (my small community of both foreign and local friends). We

hold the event at a local izakaya called Kaisendonya owned by Etsuo Fujimoto. The largest group we've hosted had an afternoon and evening seating that fed 68 people. To express the cultural significance of Thanksgiving in America, we talk about the importance of the meal and what it now represents. After dinner and dessert, we play games to help share what we are thankful for and show Thanksgiving movies on the big screen to usher in the holiday season. Towards the end of the night you can really feel the warmth and communion between everyone in the room. This exchange is the true goal of the Thanksgiving dinner.



## All Treats, No Tricks

Another big event I hold is a Halloween party. I host two different parties, one for children during the day and one for adults in the evening. We have activities, games, photo shoots, and trick-or-treating for the children. All the events are held in English to encourage communication for the kids to use the skills they practice in school and tutoring. For the adults I cook theme related foods, play a variety of games, and hold a costume contest to encourage the locals to dress up and revel in the holiday spirit.

This event was born out of a conversation between a friend who owned a now-closed English bar and I. We were talking about American holidays that are known in Japan but not celebrated. One of my favorites was Halloween. He enjoyed my enthusiasm for the holiday and asked me to plan a party at his location. That was the first one to happen and it's become

a tradition that I now host at my own English conversation bar. This is the reason why I keep doing them; It's become a tradition. I like parties and I like keeping up traditions, especially those I've had a hand in starting.

*"It's become a tradition"*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a plan to host a Valentine's Day party, a Woman's Day event, an American-style summer BBQ, a Black History Month celebration, Thanksgiving, a Halloween party, and a Christmas party. However, all events have been postponed until I can find a way to host the parties while keeping everyone safe and the spread of the virus to a minimum.

While events are on hold, I'm getting prepared to add a sweets café to my business stead called Karmel Apple Kafe. The sweets will be American themed and there will be seasonal themed items as well. This will kickoff by November 2020.



## Lessons a Book Couldn't Teach

People are receptive to learning about other cultures when given the chance to experience them on a first hand basis. Reading about a holiday in a book or an article versus experiencing it first hand are two totally different things. You can dispel so many fears, wrong information, and stereotypes when people are allowed to experience the event first hand, especially when the hosts are knowledgeable about various outlooks on the event/holiday in question.

*"Reading about a holiday in a book or an article versus experiencing it first hand are two totally different things"*

I don't do what I do for recognition or to be told "good job". I host events because it's a joy for me. Hosting allows me to put some of my passions to use (cooking, parties, being social, learning and teaching others new things in a fun environment). That's the only reason I started my business and the reason I will continue to host events.

Nicholle is from Atlanta, Georgia and currently resides in Ube, Yamaguchi. She is a self-made business owner in Japan. When she is not busy working you can find her supporting the community by offering a small range of cultural exchange opportunities that will be expanding in the future. You can learn more about her events and businesses on Instagram at [sourapplebabys](https://www.instagram.com/sourapplebabys), Facebook at [SourApple Patch](https://www.facebook.com/SourApplePatch), or on her website [Sourapplepatch](https://www.sourapplepatch.com).





# Looking back at Omikoshi 2019

**Eahab Masoud**  
(Ehime)

## An Omikoshi Invitation

Coming to Japan, aside from the challenge of living in a foreign country, I knew I would be faced with many cultural barriers and possibly new fears I would have to overcome. In order to grow and learn as a person and a language ambassador, I decided to face my fears and experience new things while in Japan. In October 2019, I was invited by friends to participate in Matsuyama, Ehime's *omikoshi* festival. Every year in Japan during autumn, this special event is held. An omikoshi is a portable shrine that Shinto believers carry between main shrines and temporary shrines. It is a festival to transport a *kami*, or deity, from one shrine to another. It is said that the kami comes down from the world of kami to bless the faithful's homes. What is interesting about this festival is that a sacred symbol from the kami's shrine, such as a mirror, is placed inside the portable shrine.

I knew omikoshi was dangerous to participate in, but I didn't want that to come in the way of experiencing new things while living in Japan. Since the omikoshi is big in size, it is important to have many members to carry it. These members are in teams representing different local areas in the city. The team I became a part of was known as *Dogo Mura* omikoshi. Dogo is the main area in Matsuyama in which the event took place. The audience consisted of the local area's citizens and the omikoshi participants. There were six teams in the women's division and eight teams in the men's division. The size of each team was different, but Dogo Mura had about 100 members. Both divisions participated in similar activities throughout the event. However, the men's omikoshi included a special event known as the omikoshi clash. It is said that the winner of this clash is blessed with good fortune and harvest.



Before participating in the omikoshi festival, I didn't know what to expect since it was my first time. However, the friends who invited me into their team were happy to see me join and get involved in their cultural activities. Little did I know, it would become one of the hardest yet rewarding experiences I've ever had living in Japan.

“Little did I know, it would become one of the hardest yet rewarding experiences I've ever had living in Japan.”





*The stairs of Isaniwa shrine  
in Matsuyama, Ehime*

omikoshi inside as we waited for the shrine's monk to bless it. This marked the beginning of the event. It was then time to carry the omikoshi down the stairs. Dogo Mura gathered to carry the shrine down the long stairs of Isaniwa Shrine. When we reached the bottom, people were there cheering, and there was camera personnel recording the event. We raised our hands and started chanting, *yoisa*, which means "heave-ho!" This chant was used often throughout the day as we carried the omikoshi. It was then time for the omikoshi clash. This part of the festival took place in front of Botchan Karakuri Clock, one of the main spots in Dogo. The goal of this clash is to cause the opponent team's omikoshi to topple over.

## Clash of Gods

Before our turn to battle came, I was able to communicate with other Dogo Mura members. There was another foreigner here who was from the Philippines. Being the only two foreigners in Dogo Mura, we were interviewed on camera before our team entered battle. We were asked questions like, "What do you like about this festival?" and "Where are you from?" Our turn finally came to battle. I was a little nervous and scared since I heard about injuries that happened in the past—even cases of death—but nonetheless, I was ready. My friends and I went to the middle-back of the omikoshi since it was considered the safest spot. Being in the middle, we were protected from attackers of the other team since we were surrounded by our team members. As we battled the opponent team during the first round, one of the team members in the front

fell to the ground. Everyone tried to pull him back on his feet and found he was bleeding from the head. Luckily, it wasn't too serious, and he made it out fine. We lost the first round since our omikoshi ended up toppling over. After losing the first round, our leader gave us a prep-speech and encouraged us to win the second round. There was still a chance to win, so Dogo Mura was not ready to give up just yet. In the second round, we had better coordination and strength compared to the first round. As we charged to the opponent team's omikoshi, we were able to get it to topple over and win. In the third round, it was a close battle as both teams fought, but we couldn't endure and lost the round.

After the omikoshi clash, we walked to our designated lunch spot with our shrine. We ate rice balls and miso soup. After that, we were assigned to carry the omikoshi around Dogo Park to various houses for about two hours. While Dogo Mura carried the omikoshi around the area, we stopped at different houses to receive blessings from the families in the community; usually, in the form of a certificate with sake. The event ended in the evening, with everyone returning to their homes. At the end of the day, I received from Dogo Mura a certificate for participating in the event.



## Lift-off!

It was around 3 a.m. when my friends and I arrived at Dogo Mura's meeting spot. We saw other members and greeted them. We then went into an underground parking structure where all members had gathered. The group's head members gave a prep-speech and talked about the plan for the day. It felt like a sport as they laid out our walking route on a whiteboard. We then drank sake, had salt put on our shoulders (to ward off evil spirits), and headed towards Isaniwa shrine; our destination point for carrying Dogo Mura's omikoshi. Once we arrived, we entered the shrine's big gates and placed our

*Hachiawase (Omikoshi Clash).  
Two teams battle to make the other  
team(s) Omikoshi topple over*



# Once in a Lifetime

Despite the harsh aspects of the festival, such as carrying the shrine and walking in the heat, it was very rewarding to be a part of something special; to be a part of a local community. I felt that my bond with my friends and Dogo Mura grew stronger. Moreover, this event helped me see my capabilities. I was able to work well in a team with friends, build endurance, and stay committed till the end of the festival. I saw the potential in me to do anything as long as I believed it was possible and gave it my best. But most importantly, I enjoyed every moment of this event. One of the biggest takeaways I got from this experience is to always try something new even if it might seem scary or challenging. By overcoming my fear of participating in the omikoshi festival—especially the clash—I was able to experience an unforgettable day in my life in Japan, *Ichigo Ichie* (a once-in-a-lifetime experience). This event would also become the starting point of my many adventures in other events in Japan.



Carrying the Omikoshi around the Dogo area

“– it was very rewarding to be a part of something special; to be a part of a local community.”

*Eahab Masoud was born in California, U.S.A. but grew up in Palestine. Living in different countries, Eahab enjoys learning about different cultures and languages. Japan is a country he has always wanted to learn about, especially its language, culture, and its people. This is his second year as an English ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) in Matsuyama, Ehime. During his first year living in Matsuyama, he participated in many events.*



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